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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1970
VOL. 27, NO. 3

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THIS KEY UNLOCKS COFFINS

by BRETT HALLIDAY

He was wealthy beyond words, lucky with money, with health, with women. The only thing wrong was, he was slated to die before dawn—and only Mike Shayne might save him. Could he find the key to Murder—in five short hours?

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THE NEW, COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THIS KEY UNLOCKS COFFINS

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Velvet, deadly, the voice came. "Shayne? You got a ruby ring. I got Lucy, your broad. We swap and no one gets hurt. If not"—Mike Shayne cursed softly. If not—he knew too well the answer.

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE and Lucy Hamilton left the Miami Beach restaurant that evening they were full of good food, good wine, good cheer and good comradeship. Shayne turned his convertible into the south-bound Collins Avenue traffic without a care in the world.

"Light me a cigarette, Angel," he asked his beautiful companion.

"Of course," she said, reaching into her black leather handbag. "Oh, Michael, isn't it a wonderful evening?"

It was indeed, and Shayne grunted his agreement. He took the cigarette she offered him and kept his hand poised, waiting for a match.

"I'm sure I have a pack here," she said, fumbling through the bag. "Why, what in the world is this?" She brought up her hand with a small object that had been in the clutter on the bottom of the bag. It was a man's heavy gold ring. The red stone in the ornate mounting winked like a baleful red eye in the glow of neon signs and headlights.

"That's strange," she said. "I never saw this thing before. How

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could it have gotten into my bag?"

Shayne gave up waiting for a match and pushed in the electric lighter in the dashboard.

"Let's not care," he said. It's too nice a night for a mystery, angel."

I

WHEN THE MAN hit her the dyed blonde staggered back three steps to crash against the wall of the old frame stucco building.

"I don't know," she protested. "I swear I don't know."

The man's dark eyes hated her and his lips curled bitterly over yellowed teeth.

"You're lying," he said. "You know it. You're a stupid, lying bitch. Who did you give it to? Who? Who?"

He hit her again, a hard left jab that splintered a tooth and slammed her head against the rotten plaster of the wall. Her knees sagged and she groped helplessly for a support that wasn't there. The man didn't give her a chance to recover. His right hand hit her hard in the stomach.

"Don't you try none of that faking on me. All you had to do was bring it here. That's all. Now you claim you ain't got it. So who did you give it to? Who paid you, you stupid bag? Was it Sam?"

He cocked his fist back to hit her again.

"Please, Georgie," she pleaded. "I swear I never—I done just what you told. I left my bag on the sink in the washroom for exactly four minutes while I went in the closet. You know you set my watch yourself."

"It was the wrong time."

"No, it wasn't. You told me yourself—four minutes starting at exactly nine o'clock. Where I was I couldn't see—like you said I wasn't to watch—but I heard people come in and out. Then I got the bag and brought it right here."

"You're lying," George insisted. His thin, dark face was twisted with the effort of thought. Sweat greased his cheeks and neck. His eyes were at once baffled and greedy. George had been both afraid and hungry since the moment of his birth.

"I dunno how, but you're lying. Who got it offa you? How? When? You want I should really work you over?" He hit her half-heartedly.

"Georgie, how could I? I din't even know what it was she was to put in my bag. I was just to bring the bag here. You know that."

"It was a ring," George said. "It was a man's ring with a red stone in it. You better remember what you done with it. If you don't I gotta kill you to find out, or the Deacon will kill us both. So think, Joanie, think."

She stood and sobbed and tried to think. Her nails scrabbled helplessly against the plaster. He rocked on the balls of his feet in front of her like a boxer waiting for the bell. Finally she managed an answer.

"Maybe—maybe I never had it at all."

"What do you mean by that? Come on. Give."

"I mean do you suppose—I mean, maybe whoever it was had this ring put it in the wrong bag. I mean suppose maybe there was another bag like mine? Do you see?"

"I see," he said after a while. 'It could of happened that way. Only what I don't see is how that helps us. The Deacon is gonna want that ring. He's gonna want it bad enough to kill us if we don't come up with it. The Deacon don't like no fairy stories when he wants a ring."

In spite of himself George shivered at his own thoughts. "He ain't gonna like it."

She wiped her bleeding face on the sleeve of her dress. Woman-like, one hand went up to poke the dyed hair back in place. "But look, hon. Look at this. Suppose we get it back before he gets here. After all, suppose that was what happens. Whoever finds it ain't gonna know it's important. How could they? Suppose we like offer a reward? It might work. Mightn't it?"

"I dunno," he said. "I dunno what else to try. Damn it, I can't even ask the other people without them knowing I ain't got it. I dunno. It might work."

"Sure, Georgie," she said. "Sure it'll work. I just know it will."

In the darkened bedroom of the back hall the old man lay very, very still and listened to every word. Most of his teeth were gone and his limbs were twisted and tortured by arthritis, but there was nothing wrong with his ears.

II

IT WAS A bright and sparkling morning with a sea breeze blowing in off Biscayne Bay. Mike Shayne and Lucy was having a quick second breakfast in his Flagler St. office with their mutual friend Tim Rourke, ace feature writer for the *News* Rourke was a long and gangling man, sort of an oversized and ungraceful Fred Astaire in appearance. He had a keen and critical mind and an apparently limitless capacity for alcohol.

Where Lucy Hamilton was drinking coffee and cream, and Shayne coffe laced with brandy, Rourke

had a cup of brandy only slightly colored by a spoonful of coffee. All three were eating Danish pastries and poppy-seed rolls.

"Show Tim your mystery ring," Shayne said casually. He was leaning back in his oversize swivel chair with his feet up on the desk and positively exuding self-satisfaction.

"Oh yes," Lucy said, fishing in her handbag. "Take a look at this, Tim. It just appeared in my handbag last night. I'm positive I never even saw this thing before, and then there it was at the bottom of my handbag. Do you believe in apports or poltergeists, Tim?"

She held out the ring.

"No," Tim Rourke said, "but I do believe in vibrations. They tell me all. Just let old Swami Tim hold that for a minute."

He examined the ring from every angle and then closed his hand about it, wrinkled his brow, and stared intently at the high ceiling of the office.

"Vibrations," he said solemnly. "I'm getting them."

"You're just getting slightly dizzy from my brandy," Shayne said. "Vibrations—bah."

"Vibrations not bah," Tim said. "Vibrations coming in loud and clear. Before you found this, Lucy, my fair one, you had been eating steak and onion rings."

Lucy Hamilton gave a small gasp of surprise.

"Not only that," Rourke continued, "but you'd eaten them at Belder's Steak House on the Beach. Am I right?"

"Yes," Lucy said. "How do you suppose he knew that, Michael? Do you think there are vibrations?"

"Vibrations—bah!" Shayne said even more emphatically than before. "One of his stool pigeons saw us there last night and vibrated the news to him over the phone. That's all there is to it. Right, Tim?"

"Wrong, Mike old friend," Rourke intoned solemnly. "Perhaps now you'll believe in the mystic powers of the last of seventy generations of mystic Rourkes."

"He's got seventy mystic rocks in his head," Shayne said. "Now cut out the flapdoodle, Tim. It's too nice a morning to play games with that ring."

"Somebody doesn't think so," Tim Rourke said. He took a copy of the News off the floor where he'd put it when he came in and turned to the classified advertising section. After hunting through the pages to locate lost and found, he circled an item in ink and handed the paper to his friend. Shayne read:

LOST man's ruby ring. My wife accidentally put it in your purse instead of hers in the Lady's Room at Belder's Steak House on Miami Beach Sunday night. Ring has great sentimental value to me. Reward. Call Mr. Burger at 333-4542.

"One of the boys in the city room showed me that this morning," Rourke said. "He thought it was funny, and so did I. Of course I

didn't know it'd turn out to be another Mike Shayne mystery."

"Good thing you noticed," Shayne said. He picked up the ring and began examining it more closely.

"That poor woman," Lucy said. "I'll bet he didn't let her have a moment's rest or peace of mind last night."

She picked up the phone on her desk and dialed the number given in the advertisement. "Mr. Burger, please. Oh. It is? Well that's all right. I can leave the message with you. It's about his lost and found ad. I have his ring. Yes, that's right. Have him call this number—she gave Shayne's office phone—and ask for Miss Hamilton. That's right —Hamilton."

"What was all that about?" Shayne asked.

"Oh, nothing much. It was just an answering service is all. I'd have thought he'd have given his home number about a thing like this."

"Maybe he beat up his wife for losing the ring and doesn't want to stay home," Tim Rourke offered.

"That's not funny, Tim," Lucy said.

"No, it isn't," Shayne said, "but I'm beginning to think that there's something really funny about this whole business. I think maybe you phoned too soon."

"What do you mean by that?" Rourke asked.

"Well, for one thing, I've been looking at this ring, and I'll be hanged if this stone is any ruby. Unless I miss my bet, it's a garnet, and a flawed one at that."

"Are you sure, Michael?" Lucy asked.

"Sure enough so I'd make a good sized bet on it, Angel. I've looked at enough of these things in my day so I ought to know. So why wouldn't a man know what the stone is in a ring that has great sentimental value for him?"

"Maybe he just thought most people think of any red stone as a ruby," Rourke said.

"Maybe he thinks his wife's silk purse was made from a sow's ear," Shayne said. "If he did that he'd be taking the chance that a finder who knew stones would recognize it as a garnet and not phone him at all. The only smart thing would be to identify the stone properly. His ad says ruby, so he must have thought that's what it was."

"He could be stupid enough for that," Rourke said. "Lots of people are."

"Maybe it is sentiment anyway," Lucy said. "I think you're just making a mountain out of a molehill, dear. Besides isn't there a date or something engraved inside the band? Probably the date the sentiment is connected with."

Shayne looked inside the ring and then picked up a magnifying glass and studied what he saw there.

"That's funny too," he said. "There's something wrong about this inscription. Look here."

He took a scratch pad and pen and copied what he saw inside the band. There were four numbers separated by fair intervals of blank space. Like this: 3# 6# 19# 12.

"That's a date," Lucy said. "March 6, 1912 I'd say. Maybe his birthday."

"It's not the style of ring they made sixty years ago," Shayne said. "This setting is modern."

"Well, maybe his wife gave it to him and had his birthday engraved in it anyhow?"

"That would be sort of silly, even for the wife of a man who doesn't know garnets from rubies," Rourke said. "She'd be more likely to put in their wedding date. Not that I can see how it makes any real difference. We can give him back his property without having to know what the date means, can't we?"

"We not only can," Lucy said, "but it's our moral duty to give it to him. I don't see what all the fuss is about anyway, Michael. What possible difference can it make?"

"I don't know," Shayne said. "I guess it's just that when you've been in the private detective business as long as I have you get a sixth sense for a phony set-up. To me this one is a phony. Don't ask me why. It just smells that way. Just like those numbers don't look like a date. They remind me of something all right but it isn't anybody's birthday date. It's something I ought to recognize, but I don't. The whole thing bothers me."

He got up and walked over to the bank of filing cabinets against the inside wall of the office. He opened one of the drawers and took out a bottle of first rate brandy about three quarters full and a couple of paper cups. He went into the kitchenette built into the back office and filled one of the paper cups with tap water from the sink. Then he came back and filled the other cup with brandy. He put the bottle back in the cabinet and stood with a cup in each hand.

"The whole ring business stinks," Shayne said and swallowed first the brandy and then the water.

"Mike," Tim Rourke said. "I've been watching you drink good brandy out of a paper cup for more years than I like to think, and every time you do it I wince. Where did you ever pick up a habit like that?"

Shayne wrinkled his brow and grinned. One big hand went up to tug at his ear lobe as he thought.

"You know," he said, "I hadn't thought about that in years. It was a girl named Doris taught me after a high school dance. That was a long time ago."

He went and got his hat off the window sill where he'd tossed it when he came in.

"This whole thing bugs me," he said. He took the ring off the desk blotter and put it in his pocket. "I'm going out and see what I can find out about it. If brother Burger phones while I'm out stall him for a while."

III

MIKE SHAYNE got his car out of the nearby parking gargage and headed west and north past Lummus Park, where the hundred and thirty year old barracks from the Seminole Wars still stood to the new and shining Police Headquarters building stood almost in the shadow of the towering county Justice Building across the road.

As a friend of the Chief he didn't hesitate to put his car in the reserved police parking lot. It was the only way he could have avoided feeding the hungry maw of one of the forest of parking meters which surrounded the whole government and hospital complex of buildings which covered what had once been a golf course. Even the unemployed poor coming down to register for compensation payments had to use metered space or walk nearly a mile.

Chief Will Gentry's office was always open to his old friend. The two rough-hewn, broad shouldered men sat down together over a couple of the Chief's best long cigars and glasses of Bourbon-and-branch-water.

Shayne got right to the point and showed Gentry the ring.

"I think you're seeing spooks that ain't in the graveyard at all," the Chief said. "This is just a piece of junk jewelry. It's not worth getting excited about."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "I know it and you know it. But what if somebody else doesn't know it? Will, the whole thing smells to me like dead mackerel in a backwater. Why would somebody ask his wife to put it in her bag anyway—and why in a washroom? If he gave it to her to put away, why not right at the table?"

LUCY HAMILTON

"I'm a busy man," the Chief said. "Two cases of cheap, nickel-plated Slobovian made .32 caliber revolvers were heisted off the docks last night. By now every hopped-up young hood on the North Side will have one and be honing to try it out on one of my boys. I've got to send in

teams with dogs to shake down ten thousand pool hall punks tonight to try and get some of them back."

"Why the dogs?" Shayne asked.

"They're the best friends my boys have in those alleys," Gentry said. "A trained dog can smell trouble. I swear it. Besides the muggers and the maryjane in set are scared to hell of dogs."

"Good thing they're scared of something. But at least do me one thing, Will. See if your files have anything on a Burger who uses an answer service."

"You know I will if you insist," the Chief said. "You also know it'll be a waste of time. We got forty Burgers in the files for everything from pimping to B. and E. Who picks the right one? That is if he's using his right name—which he probably isn't."

"Okay. Okay," Shayne said. "It was just a hunch."

"You bring me something better than a hunch," Will Gentry told him. "Bring me any sort of proof that a crime either has been or is going to be commited, and I'll give you the same sort of cooperation I always have. I'll go all out for you."

"I know it, Will. I'm sorry."

"It isn't that I don't think your hunches are good." Chief Gentry was a bit on the defensive himself. "This place has grown up since you and I first worked together. The city's three times as big and the Syndicate's moved in. We've got race hate groups and kids on drugs and a hundred thousand Spanish. Sheriff Fred Burdick has county jurisdiction over more people than I do now. I just haven't the men or the time to check out hunches."

"I said I was sorry, Will. I just didn't think. You know how I am when I get wound up about something."

"If you get anything, bring it to me," the Chief said in farewell.

Shayne drove back across the Miami River and west to a big old house that had once been a mansion and was now the headquarters of the third largest bolita book in the county. The head of the book was his friend B. J. Ramirez—otherwise Betty Jane, granddaughter of the man who had built the big house.

She took Shayne past the ground floor office and upstairs to her private quarters and mixed him a pitcher of her famous Island Rum Punch. He told his story and showed her the ad and the ring.

"You're right," she said, turning the ring over and over in her long-fingered, competent hand. "I'd say there was something buried in this woodpile for sure. The ring's junk."

"Of course the value might be sentimental, like the ad says," Shayne allowed.

"I don't think so, Mike. If it was straight sentiment he'd have used his own phone or home address. Deal with these punks as much as I do and I get to know their ways. Whoever set this up used an answering service precisely beause it

wouldn't lead right to him. That's point one. Point two—I don't think those numbers inside the band are a date any more than you do.

"My vote would be for some kind of a code. Point three—the engraving is brand new. The inside of the cuts are shiny. If the ring had been worn long, they'd be dulled like the rest of the gold. No; this was done not more than a couple of days ago, and I'll bet my bank it's what makes this bauble important."

"That's exactly my thinking," Shayne said.

She grinned at him. "Tell me the truth, Mike. Did you spot the new engraving before I did?"

He laughed outright. "No by God, I didn't. Neither did Lucy or Tim Rourke or Will Gentry himself. Another blooper like that and I'll figure I'm slipping and go up to the police academy for a brushup course." He drank most of the glass of rum and refused a refill.

"I'm interested," Betty Jane said. "I'll do what I can to help you, Mike. I don't know how much that will be, but I'll try."

"I'm not asking you to stick your neck out for me."

"You know I'd do it without asking." She gave him a long, affectionate look. "You know I've got an ulterior motive. Someday that Lucy of yours may want to retire. If that happens, I'd like to be at the head of the line."

Shayne said nothing, knowing perfectly well that anything he might remark would be the wrong thing.

"All right," she said. "Play it cool. When the time comes, I'll be there. Anyway—my runners talk to everybody sooner or later. I'll pass the word I'm interested in that ad, and if there's anything at all on the grapevine they'll pick it up. How's that for a starter?"

"It's fine," Shayne said. "Now I'll be going. I want to talk to the answering service pal Burger used."

He found the place easily enough by checking its number against those listed in the Yellow Pages. It was on the second floor of an old building on North East Second Avenue.

On the way over he found himself wondering why he was making the effort at all. It wasn't a case, or strictly any of his professional or personal business. It could be a perfectly simple thing that he'd allowed his imagination to build up out of all relation to its real importance.

Still, Shayne had a stubborn streak and Irish faith in his own hunches. "If I hadn't been meant to look into this, it wouldn't have showed up in Lucy's purse."

Two weary girls of about high school age were struggling with a busy switchboard in the answering service office. One of them jerked a not-too-clean thumb to direct Shayne to the door of the inner office.

The room was only slightly larger than a phone booth. Inside were a small desk, a large, blowsy, middle-aged woman drinking gin

out of an unwashed tumbler and two chairs.

"Set," the woman said, indicating the unused chair. "I ain't got but the one glass or I'd stand you a snort."

"Thanks," Shayne said, "but I didn't come to take away your good liquor. I brought you something."

He put a ten dollar bill on the desk top.

The woman's eyes lit up. One fat hand slapped the table, and the ten spot disappeared. She looked Shayne over.

"Another Shamus," she said. "You peepers are the only gravy this business has. Always glad to do business as long as the Federal lettuce keeps coming. So which one of my clients is it you want bugged this time?"

Shayne showed her the newspaper ad. "Who bought it?"

"Oh. Him?" She snuffled her profound contempt and poured more gin into the tumbler. "I never seen him before he come in here. A real cheap skate. Wanted to buy service a day at a time but I told him—"

"Did he leave a home number?" Shayne asked.

"Him? Nah. No number, no address. 'I'll call you,' he says like he was J. P. Gotrocks in person. You can bet I made that one pay a week in advance, and looked it over careful for mickey-mouse bills before I took it. You can bet your beezocker on that, Big Boy. Sure you won't have a slug of this here firewater with me?"

She was viewing Shayne with bleary affection.

He lit a cigar. In that small space her breath was overpowering.

"At least you got a look at him," he said. "Can you describe him for me?" Another bill hit the table and vanished in its turn.

"The best way to describe that one, sweetie," she said, "is he looked like he didn't want to be described. He had a hat turned down and smoked blinders the size of pie plates. Outside of that he was a little skinny runt who shoulda had a hole in his pants. Looked like a jockey missed the last race and never got over it. You know, mad at the world and everybody in it."

"No scars or things like?"

"How would I know, Big Boy? I don't have the customers do no strip act in here. You sure you won't have no gin."

"I don't drink," Shayne said.

She laughed in his face.

"A real kidder," she said. "I wasn't born yesterday. You ain't one of them alky-annie-mouse boys?"

Shayne assured her he wasn't. Ten minutes and two more bills after that he had her promise to let him know if the mysterious Mr. Burger contacted her again. She checked with one of the girls that he had called and got Lucy's message.

Before leaving the office he called Lucy to check in. When the phone

was answered it was a strange man's voice.

"Mike Shayne? This is Sgt. Rucker of the Detective Division. Shayne. You better get on back here in a hurry."

"What's wrong?"

"We don't know for sure, Shayne. It looks like somebody came in here while you was gone. He clobbered Tim Rourke and he hasn't come to yet. It looks like whoever it was took your girl with him when he left."

"I'm on my way," Shayne said and sprinted for his car.

IV

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE ran up the stairs to his ofice it was full of the sergeant and another detective, a uniformed patrolman, an ambulance intern and two attendents and Tim Rourke confusedly resisting the efforts of the others to get him onto a stretcher. There was a bandage around Rourke's head, and blood soaking through the white wrapings, but he was flailing his arms and kicking out at the men.

When they saw Shayne everyone stopped what they were doing.

"Mike!" Rourke yelled. "Make these fatheads stop bothering me. We've got work to do."

"Where's Lucy?" Shayne asked of everyone and anyone.

"Lucy?" Tim Rourke said. "She was right here when I was hit."

"We don't know where she is,

Shayne," the detective sergeant said. "Patrolman Robbins was on traffic watch a block down Flagler Street. He looked this way and saw what he thought was a woman being pushed into a car at the curb downstairs. He wasn't sure at the time, but it might have been your secretary. He's seen her often enough. Anyway he came on up and checked your office. When he found Rourke on the floor with his head busted open, he called Headquarters and they sent me and the ambulance."

"Does Will Gentry know?"

"Chief Gentry has an A.P.B. and is putting up road blocks in likely spots. When we left he was roaring like a bull."

"Good." Shayne said. 'What was it all about, Tim?"

"It was about an hour after you left, Mike. We were just sitting here talking. I swear I didn't suspect a thing. You know I'd have—"

"I know you'd have fought for Lucy," Shayne said. "Go on and tell us the rest of it."

"Anyway the two of them came in. One was a sour looking little runt in dark glasses. He looked mean but not dangerous. The other was a big blonde with a bruised face."

The second detective had been taking notes. "What was she wearing, Mr. Rourke?"

"A dress I think. Oh, you mean the color? Blue, maybe green. I'm not sure."

"Go on with your story," Shayne said. "Take it easy now and don't forget anything."

"Well, the woman did most of the talking. First she asked if I was Mike Shayne. I said I wasn't. Then she asked Lucy if she was the Miss Hamilton who'd called about a ring. Lucy said yes and was the woman Mrs. Burger."

"How do you spell Burger?" the detective with the notebook asked. "Is that B-u or B-e?"

"Shut up and let him talk," the sergeant said. "These people are personal friends of Chief Gentry."

The detective's face showed that he got the point.

"The runt spoke up then," Rourke said. "He said he was Burger and it was his ring. Could he have it please? Lucy said sure he could if he'd wait till you got back. You had it.

"After that the two of them went into a hudle over by the door. They were whispering and talking so low I couldn't hear. Lucy asked if they wanted her to call around and see if she could find you, Mike. She said you might be with Chief Gentry.

"That seemed to make up their minds. The man said not to bother, they'd wait. The woman walked over to the window there. That put her in back of me. Like a damn fool I didn't watch her. The man walked over towards Lucy and put his hand in his pocket.

"That was when the roof fell in as far as I was concerned. There wasn't any warning at all. She must have had a slungshot in her bag, and sapped me as hard as she could swing it. The next thing I knew these apes were trying to take me to a hospital. Tell 'em I don't need any hospital, Mike."

"He probably doesn't," Shayne said. "His head's solid stone."

"That's not fair, Mike. You know it isn't. I hadn't any reason to think they'd try rough stuff."

"You would have had," Shayne reminded him, "If you'd listened to me this morning. I said this whole deal stunk."

"I guess that applies to me too." It was Will Gentry from the doorway. "I got here as fast as I could. Believe me, Mike, we'll find Lucy if we have to tear every house in this town apart."

Mike Shayne walked over to the chair behind his desk and sat down heavily.

"They could have her out in the county by now," he said. "Anyway they'll call me when they're ready

and offer to trade her for the damned ring. It could help if you put a trace on the call for me."

"It's already been ordered," Gentry said.

"What will you do when they call?" Rourke asked. "Oh, my head."

"I'll agree to trade," Shayne said. "At least that'll keep them in touch with me. Sooner or later I'll get my hands on one of them. That one will tell me all about it."

Shayne slammed his big fist down on the desk top so hard the phone jumped out of its cradle.

"Nowadays even people like that have rights," Gentry said. "You can't just—" He stopped when he saw the look on the big redhead's face.

"He'll talk voluntarily," Shayne said in a low voice. "As a matter of fact, he'll beg me to let him talk. I think I can promise you that."

After a time most of the men went away. Tim Rourke stayed, and so did Will Gentry. It was late in the afternoon but not yet dinner time. Gentry and Rourke had some brandy from Shayne's private stock. He himself didn't drink.

Finally Shayne turned to the others.

"You know I don't want to be tailed when I leave here, Will," he said.

"Look, Mike. For your own protection—" The chief was emphatic, if embarrassed. "You don't know what you'll be walking into or how many of them there are. Just let me put on a tail so I'll know where you are. We won't interfere till you get Lucy. You know that. I love that girl like my own sister."

"I know it," Shayne said, "but I can't risk it. If they spot your man, it could blow the whole deal. I swear you can have them later on."

"Will's right, Mike," Rourke said, nursing his head. "You aren't any young Lochinvar any more."

"I'm still myself," Shayne said, "and it's my girl they've got. You let me do it my way."

Neither of the two men wanted to argue with him. They sat and smoked and nursed their drinks while the minutes stretched out like hours. When the phone on Shayne's desk finally rang all three of them jumped and looked at it as if it was the last thing in the world they'd expected to happen.

The big detective picked up the instrument. It looked small in his hand.

"Michael Shayne speaking," he said. "Go ahead."

"Mr. Shayne?" a thin voice came back to his ear. "Mr. Shayne? I must speak to Mr. Shayne himself."

Will Gentry had the extension phone to his ear and was rapidly making notes of each word. Tim Rourke was reading over his shoulder. Somewhere across the city police and phone company monitors were locking in on the call.

"I tell you I'm Mike Shayne. Don't be afraid. Go ahead."

"I have only time to say this once. They just left to call you about the woman."

"Who just left?"

"Georgie and—Never mind. Don't give them the ring, Mr. Shayne. No matter what they say. Don't let them have it. Bring it to me."

"Why you?" Shayne asked.

"Because it isn't a ring, Mr. Shayne. It's a key to a half million dollars. You see? I'll split with you. I only want a little. You can have almost all. I listened. I know."

"Who are you?" Shayne asked. "Where are you? What is this about? I don't give a damn about rings or money. I want Lucy Hamilton back. If this Georgie gives me Lucy, he can have the ring and the money too for all I care."

"Don't you see?" the old voice said. "When they have the ring back, they'll kill you and Miss Lucy. You know too much. They know who you are and they won't dare let you live. If Georgie hesitates, he'll have his orders."

"Orders from who?" Shayne asked.

"Never mind. It won't make any difference. Anyway, you've got to deal with me. You got to."

"Why?" Shayne said. "Why you? If Georgie offers me Lucy?"

"It won't make any difference what he offers, Mr. Shayne. He can't give you Lucy. I'm taking her out of here right now. Don't you see? He won't have her. I will."

"All right," Shayne said. "Who are you? Where are you?"

The phone went dead.

Shayne got up and stood very stiff and straight with the phone in his hand. He looked as if he wanted to pull it off the wall and throw it out the window, but he didn't. He put it very carefully back in its cradle. Then he took a cauple of steps and hit the wall with his fist so hard plaster broke and fell to the floor.

"That's all I needed," he said. "Some dessicated, seventh son of a baboon has to come and take a hand. The amateur touch. That's what it needed. That's just what this whole mess needed."

Gentry had been talking to his office over the second phone in the back office.

"They didn't quite have time to bull's eye that call," he said, "but they did narrow it down to someplace south of 79th St. and east of Seventh Avenue. I'll have that area closed in in ten minutes so even a mouse can't get in or out."

"Pull your boys off, Will," Shayne said. "Let's not us start acting like Foxy Grandpa on the phone. They've still got Lucy between them. Till I get her out I want them free to hold a picnic on the courthouse roof if they feel like it."

"We only want to help, Mike."

"The only way anybody can help right now is to stay out of it. You know that. Spook this Georgie or his boss and they're likely to start killing. I don't want them nervous. Right now I want everybody happy —most particularly Lucy."

Gentry picked up the phone and called headquarters again.

"Just what do you figure to do, Mike?" he asked when he'd made the call.

"Nothing I don't have to right now," Shayne said bitterly. "The only way to keep everybody happy is to do what they say. Somebody says don't give Georgie the ring, so I won't. Georgie says give it over before I see Lucy, so I'll put it right in his hot little hand. You see."

"That would be a neat act," Rourke said. "You don't and you do at the same time. I could book that one at the Palace."

"Sure you could," Gentry said. "All clear as mud."

Shayne didn't bother with explanations. He dug around in file drawers till he came up with a tin box of mixed tools and extracted a small rattail file. Then he hunted through Lucy's desk and found a stub piece of red jeweler's chalk. He took the ring back to his desk, turned on the desk lamp and went to work very carefully with the file.

"I'm going to fix this ring so it won't do Georgie any good after he gets it," he said. "The key to this thing has to be in the numbers, so I'm making a couple of improvements of my own."

The numbers read: 3-6-19-12. Shayne used the file very carefully to take out the 1 in 19 and the 2 in 12. The inscription now read: 3-6-9-1. He used the jeweler's chalk to polish the whole ring in an effort to hide what he'd done. It wouldn't fool an expert or even a close examination, of course, but he hoped Georgie wouldn't notice anything right away. As an added touch he used the file again to make it look as if he'd removed another digit in front of the three.

"That should give Georgie something to test his wisdom teeth on," he said. "Keep him out of mischief for a while anyway."

"Let's see," Rourke said.

"Later," Shayne told him. "Right now this had better be my secret. That way if they want the answer they'll have to come to me the way I want them to."

"You're withholding evidence in a police case," Gentry said without much conviction.

"Now you sound like Petey Painter," Shayne said. "We've been going over this for twenty years man and boy. Evidence isn't evidence till a case is solved. When this one is, I'll draw you a picture."

The phone rang.

"Mike Shayne?" the voice said. It was a younger voice than in the previous call.

"Speaking," Shayne said.

"We got your girl, Mike," the voice said. "We got her nice and safe where nobody's gonna find her."

"You know what will happen to you if you hurt her?" Mike Shayne said. He couldn't resist it.

"Hold on. Hold on," the voice said. "We don't want to hurt her. We don't even want to keep her. What we want is a trade."

"How much will it cost me?"

"Not how much, Mike. This ain't that sort of a snatch. We just trade even, see? You give me a certain ruby ring that belongs to me anyway. We give you your sweetie back. Not a dime of cash comes into it."

"How do I know I can trust you?" Shayne said.

"You don't. Only you ain't got no choice. Only just think it over. Why should we cross you? A nice clean deal and everybody's happy. You take your girl to dinner just like nothing happened. Okay? Anything else and we got you sniffing on our trail like a bloodhound. You tell me, Shayne. Why would we want that?"

"I don't suppose you would."

"So you do like I tell you now, Shayne. Exactly one hour from now you be at the northeast Second Ave. entrance to the old city cemetery. Just walk west on the main road crossing the cemetery. Don't wear a hat so we can recognize you. You'll be contacted. When you are you just hand over that ring. Nice and easy. Any tough guy monkey business and your girl gets it for sure. And don't bring cops. You got me?"

"I understand," Shayne said. "One hour from now."

"Just one more thing, Shamus. You tell that horse-faced chief of fly cops it don't make no difference if he traces this call. It ain't only a pay booth." The phone went dead.

"Horse-faced am I?" Will Gentry bellowed from the back office. "I'll show that cheap little punk who's horse-faced around this town."

"You do that, Chief," Tim Rourke said. "Me, I'm going to pour us each a drink."

V

IT WAS EARLY evening and northeast Second Avenue in downtown Miami was still brightly lit and curb to curb with traffic. By contrast the old city cemetery stretched, dark and deserted, to the west.

The pioneers of Miami slept there under wide-branched live-oak trees. The names cut on headstones and the bronze doors of ranked marble mausoleums had been famous once. Today not one citizen in a thousand would even recognize them. The families had gone broke or yachting rich or died out. Few mourners came here any more, and none at this time of evening.

Mike Shayne disliked cemeteries. To him they were full of the ghosts of the people who lay there. Not ghosts that jumped up to scare him, but the vital essences of humans who had loved and fought and lusted and grown old and then lain down under the dusty grass, safe from sun and rain. He felt their dead minds questing to touch his own.

On this night he shut out all reverie. He walked straight down the center of the old deserted road. Half a block from headlights and neon signs he was in a dimly lit aisle of oak and white marble angels and solid, Roman-temple mausoleums.

The voice called to him: "Mister Shayne?" and he stopped in his tracks. It wasn't either of the voices he'd heard over the phone. With something of a shock he realized that it was a woman who had called.

She stepped out of a patch of almost solid tree shade and into the road a little ahead of him.

"Mister Shayne?" she called again.

"That's me," Shayne said in a low even voice designed to keep her or anyone covering her from panicking. "Im here just as I was told to be."

Her "Oh" was one of relief. "You brought it, didn't you?" she asked and came closer.

Considering the setting and the errand she should have been a

figure of beauty and mystery, half temptress and half Borgia, wrapped in clouds of terror and allure. She wasn't. This was the beat-up dyed blonde that Tim Rourke had described. She was shorter than Shayne and her figure was still good. Her hair had been elaborately done too long ago and some of her makeup was gone. Her clothes were too young for her face and her eyes in the dim light darted like those of a frightened mouse.

"I'm Mike Shayne," he said quietly, "and I brought what you want. How do I know you're the one to give it to? How do you know Lucy's all right?"

"She's good" the woman said. "She's pretty. He won't hurt her."

"You mean Georgie won't?"

"No, Not bad anyhow." Suddenly startled: "How do you know Georgie's name? You ain't supposed to— you—"

"I know lots of things, Shayne said. "You'd be better off on my side of this deal."

She shrunk in size and shuddered as if a force went out of her under the grip of terror. "Oh, no. No. He'd kill me. Or the Deacon would for sure. Don't talk, Mister. Just give me that ring. That's all. Georgie's back there with a gun, a stutter gun. He can use it. If he sees anything he don't like, he'll cut you in half, Mr. Shayne. Before God he will. He's got to have the ring when—when somebody gets here."

"Don't worry," Shayne said. He held out his hand and let her see the ring lying in his palm. Then he closed his fingers over it again.

"Give it to me," she whispered. "Quick. If we wait too long he'll kill me too. I swear it."

"He knows well enough what I'm waiting for," Shayne said. "I've got to see Lucy before you get this. That was the deal. An even trade he said. I'm doing my part. Now I want Lucy."

"He'll keep his word," she said urgently. "Honest, Mister Shayne. Honest. I wouldn't kid you. I wouldn't have nothing to do with killing your pretty lady. Here—see."

She fished into the front of the dress she wore and got a small object from between breast and bra. "See."

It was a small card with writing on it which he couldn't read in the dim light. Taped to the card over the writing was a key.

"Give me the ring," she insisted, "and I give you this. It's the key to the house where she is. In the back room on the bed. She ain't even tied. We give her sleepy pills. I ain't lying, Mister Shayne. I swear it by my mother's grave, I ain't."

"I believe you," Shayne said. "What's your name?"

"Joanie," she said without thinking. "Joanie Decker. Hurry it up, Mister. Georgie's scared. He'll likely shoot any time."

"I guess that's fair enough. What do I tell whoever's guarding her?" Shayne asked.

The answer frightened him for the first time that day.

"Ain't nobody guarding her, Mister Shayne," Joanie said. "I swear to God they ain't nobody else in the house but the old cripple man owns it. He don't know nothin bout this. He just lays there and groans, pain has him so bad. You just pay no mind to him."

"Foxy Grandpa!" Shayne told himself and felt the icy finger trace his spine.

Aloud, he said; "Okay, Joanie Decker. I'll give it to you now. Just you remember I'm smarter and tougher than Georgie and all the rest of them put together. You come over to my side, Joannie, and I'll protect you. When you're ready you just call the *News* and ask for Mr.

Tim Rourke. He'll tell you what to do."

"No," she said, "I daren't."

He held out the ring to her and she took it off his palm and put the card and key in its place. She ran back into the shadows from which she'd come.

Shayne turned and walked back towards the gate by which he'd come into the cemetery. He made himself keep an even, only slightly hurried pace.

"If I run," he thought, "damn Georgie's soul he'll guess there's something wrong and open up on me. It's slow and steady or nothing."

He started his car north towards the address on the card he'd been given. As soon as he was far enough from the cemetery to be sure he wasn't watched, he got on his car phone and called Will Gentry.

"I've got an address in the area that first call came from. It's supposed to be where they're keeping Lucy. I'm going in. Cover that neighborhood and watch for a car with Lucy and an old man in it. I'm afraid the old boy who called me took her while the others were meeting me. He's supposed to own the house. Get his name from the tax office. Also get me a rundown on anybody in the rackets called Deacon. Yeah. Like in church."

"Hadn't you better wait till I get a car there?" Gentry asked.

"I'm going in, Will. There's just a chance Lucy's still there. If she is I don't want to spook anybody who's watching the place. There's more of them in this than I'd thought."

He hung up the phone and concentrated on driving through the heavy city traffic.

Shayne knew the neighborhood he was heading for. It was in an older section of the city. Most of the houses were old frame or frame-stucco. Many had been cut up as rental units or rooming houses. There were small grocery stores. gas stations and the like on most of the corners. Vacant lots were a jungle of weeds and rubbish.

He parked a block from the house he was looking for and walked the rest of the way. No lights showed in the house as he came up. He went into the lot and circled the rear of the place. Still no lights or sign of life in the building. Shayne had a small pocket flashlight and his big Colt .45 automatic in a shoulder holster. He wasn't afraid of anyone who might be waiting in ambush, at least not half as afraid as of finding the place empty.

When he tried the key Joanie had given him in the front door it opened easily enough. He closed the door behind him and stood still for a minute to accustom his eyes to the near dark. The house was small and so were the rooms. This one was cluttered with furniture. There were the remains of a meal

on a table to his left. His nose told him they'd eaten spaghetti and beer.

There were three bedrooms. One was small with only a single bed and a dresser. This must have been where the cripple lived. There were worn shirts and ragged underwear in the dresser.

The largest bedroom smelled of cheap perfume and more beer and must have been the one Joanie and Georgie used. They'd taken everything with them.

The small room in back was empty except for a bed with a bare mattress on it. He thought he could smell a whiff of the perfume Lucy used, but it was probably just imagination. He searched the whole house again including the bath, the filthy kitchen, and the closets to make sure. Nothing.

"When I find Grandpa," he told himself, "he'll have something to worry about besides half a million dollars."

Rage made him careless. He was half out the front door before he heard the rap of metal on metal from the car parked across the street. The car hadn't been there when he entered the house.

Shayne threw himself backward and flat on the floor. It wasn't easy. That's a fall for trained tumblers only. He put one hand on each side of the door frame and pushed back hard, at the same time swinging his feet up and forward. He lit on his back and by a miracle didn't break hip, back or shoulder.

As he rolled out of line with the open doorway the first burst of machine-pistol bullets came through the door about waist high and splintered the rear wall.

The gunner tried one more burst that raked the floor where Shayne's body had been a moment before. Then the car took off with a gear-stripping burst of speed. From two directions Shayne heard police sirens howl as Will Gentry's boys homed in on the shooting.

The big redhead sat up and felt for broken bones.

"Thank you, Georgie Burger," he said aloud. "I'll return the favor one of these days."

VI

THE THIRD CAR to reach the scene was Will Gentry's own Chief's Special with his right bower Lieutenant Maine at the wheel and the Chief and Tim Rourke in the rear seat.

They searched the house and grounds without finding anything at all, though the homicide detectives of Captain Bill Ryan's squad were confident they'd get fingerprints of anyone who'd lived in the place recently.

"If this Georgie and his people have records under any names, we'll know it soon."

Gentry had every available man combing the north side of the city

for the gunner, and also for a car containing Lucy and an old man. There was nothing else to do but wait.

They went on back to Mike Shayne's office.

"Lucy will call here if she gets away," he said.

"That's fine," Gentry said, "but I have to get on back to my own office. Tim can sit with you. Believe me, Mike, everything humanly possible will be done and then some. This is a police case now and no mistake."

"Put it out on the radio," Shayne said, "especially the shooting. I want old greedy Grandpa to hear that."

When Gentry was gone Shayne poured stiff slugs of brandy for himself and Rourke. He still felt bruised and shaken up from the fall, but his body was rapidly recovering.

"Will's out for the kill now," Rourke said. "Every man and dog on the force—"

"I know," Shayne said, "Maybe they'll actually snag old Georgie. That bum is stupid enough to stick his neck out. Plus the fact he's running scared now. On the other hand old man share-the-wealth only has to keep himself and Lucy under cover—that is if he's really the one who has her. Will's boys couldn't search every room between Little River and Lemon City even if they had warrants."

"Who else would have her?" Tim asked.

"It wouldn't be Georgie," Shayne said, "unless he scooped her in again within the last hour, and I don't think he did. I honestly think Georgie meant me to find her after he got the ring. A small time punk like that knows kidnaping is a Federal rap, and he doesn't want to tangle with Uncle Whiskers if he can possibly help it. On top of that, once he had the ring, he had no reason to keep Lucy.

"That reminds me, Tim. Call your office and have Joan Decker put through to here if she calls in. She's no bundle of joy, but she could probably tell us a lot if she wanted."

Tim Rourke made the call.

"All right," he said then. "If not Georgie, then who?"

"How about Georgie's boss he's so afraid of?" Shayne asked. "The way Georgie looks at him, he's the real tough crocodile in the stream full of snook. As soon as he gets here and finds out what's going on he'll try to get his hands on Lucy. If he does, he won't let go as easily as Georgie and his sweetie-pie."

Tim Rourke finished his first glass of brandy and poured himself another. "How will we know when he gets here?"

"How do we usually know when an earthquake starts?" Shayne asked.

"What do you think he'll do first, Mike?"

"If it was me I'd squeeze everything out of Georgie and his girl, including all the things they know but don't know they know."

"How's that?"

"Georgie's type," Shayne said, "miss the significance of most of what they see and hear. They spend a lifetime adding up two and two to make four and it gets to be a habit. When somebody slips in a two and three it still comes out four as far as they're concerned. I give this Deacon character more credit than that."

Tim Rourke said, "What makes you sure you can figure the brains of a man you've never seen?"

"It doesn't have to be a man," Shayne pointed out. "We've had woman killers before. The reason I think this one is smart is that Georgie's so scared of him."

The phone rang and they both jumped. It was Will Gentry. "They found Georgie, Mike. His car was in back of a honky-tonk bar on northwest 79th Street. He was in it."

"What does he say?" Shayne asked.

"He doesn't say, Mike. Before my boys got there somebody had cut his throat from ear to ear. It wasn't long before. The blood had barely cooled. The boys are dusting the car for prints now."

"What was on him, Will?"

"No garnet ring, if that's what you're thinking of. That is, not unless he hid it around the car someplace, but I don't think he did. The boys will put everything through the meat grinder anyway and I'll call you."

"Was he robbed?"

"I don't think so. His wallet was still in his pants with sixty-five bucks and a driver's license in the name of George Peter Burger and a Tampa address. Also a picture of a brunette wife and a couple of kids. The gun he used on you was on the front seat beside him—a beauty—an Israeli made Uzi. They're lovely guns."

"I know," Shayne said. "I met one tonight."

"Yes. I mean sure," Gentry said, "But listen to this, Mike. The gun was just lying there. He hadn't even

touched it. Can you figure that? He let somebody walk right up to him with a knife and cut his throat. It must have been somebody he knew real well."

"It was somebody he was scared to death of," Shayne said. "Somebody he knew and was so scared by that he couldn't even lift a hand to save his own life. If Georgie had been just a little bit braver that gun of his could have torn up any knife man in the world. It was fear killed him, not any knife."

'You think maybe it's that Deacon he talked about?"

"I don't think maybe, Will. I think for sure. The Big Man in this caper has arrived. Have you got any sort of make on him?"

"Nothing," Gentry sounded genuinely concerned. "We sent a query to the F.B.I. and everybody else we could think of, and everybody drew a blank. A couple of old time con men carried the nickname Deacon, but they're both dead years ago. All we get is rumors."

"You mean this Deacon is on the grapevine?"

"Not exactly, Mike. Nothing as definite as that. The name has come up in New York, Tangier, New Orleans. People hear it and react the way chickens do in a run when a hawk is way high overhead. They're scared but they aren't sure why, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Shayne said. "Keep trying, Will. I figure I'm going to meet this joker before long. It would help if I knew even one thing about him."

Shayne hung up the phone. His cigar had gone out and he relit it. He considered the half full bottle of brandy and then put it back in the file cabinet.

"What about me, Mike?" Tim Rourke said. "You know I could use another snort."

"Then go on home and drink your own bug juice," Shayne said. "At least you'll be out of the line of fire there. When this guy throws his hat in here, we're going to need something better than Dutch courage."

"Oh come on." Rourke said. "If that's what you think I'll even go on the wagon. At least till this is wrapped up."

"That's my boy," Shayne said. He got up and began to pace between the desk and the front of the office with long, nervous strides.

"Why doesn't that old fool call me?" he burst out. "If he's heard about Georgie, he must know the Deacon's here. He's got to hurry if he wants a deal."

"Maybe he isn't as scary as George," Rourke suggested. "Maybe he hasn't got a teevy or radio and hasn't heard yet."

Shayne went on pacing. He made a suggestion as to what Tim Rourke could do with his ideas. Then he made another.

"Grandpa may just want to get you so jumpy he can con you for

fair," Rourke said. "If that is it, I'd say he was doing a real fine job of it. Come on, Mike. I know it's Lucy you're worried about, but that's no excuse to stop being a detective and try to act like the boy avenger of the old smoky mountains. Put your varmint gun down, man."

"What in the devil are you talking about?"

"I mean," Rourke said, "that you're worrying yourself into a fine case of the screaming pink horribles. It won't work, and you know it. The good guys only win when they're tougher and smarter than the bad guys. Use your head, man. You're the old pro. Act like it. You can out-think any old cripple that ever cripped. I know it, so why don't you?"

Shayne stopped pacing and looked at his friend.

"Thanks," he said. "You're a real friend, Tim. I've been making a fool of myself long enough. Now let's do some head work."

"Okay," Rourke said. "Let's think then. Lucy was gone when you got to the house. Since we don't think Georgie killed her, she either got out herself, or somebody took her. Somebody took her, because otherwise she'd have been here or called by now. So the question is where did he take her? Or to put it better, where could he have taken her? There's only a limited number of places open to him to take a helpless, partly drugged woman and keep her out of sight."

"By God, Tim, you've hit it," Shayne said. He sat down behind the big desk and pulled a sheet of scratch paper and a pencil in front of him. "First of all he's poor and a cripple. What does that mean?"

He tugged at his ear lobe as he so often did when thinking hard. "It means he doesn't get out much because he can't. If he has to rent rooms to the likes of Georgie, he's too poor to have a car. He can't really take Lucy anyplace. He has to lead her just a short way, and it has to be to somebody he can trust."

"A neighbor?" Rourke suggested.

"God, what a fool I am!" Shayne yelled. He jumped up. "When I was searching that place she must have been within a hundred yards of me the whole time. She probably heard the shooting. He can't have moved her again either. That whole section of town has been as full of prowl cars as a dog of fleas. That has to be it."

Shayne grabbed up the phone and called Will Gentry.

"Have your boys search every house on the block," he said into the phone. "Tell anybody who hollers that a neighbor reported smoke coming from his house and you're looking for fire. When you find them bring them both down here. I won't file any kidnapping charge against the old man till I've talked to him. Maybe I'll give him

a fat reward for rescuing her."

"It's irregular, Mike," the Chief said.

"It'll be a lot worse than irregular if the Deacon thinks it out like we did and gets there first with that knife of his. Do I have to draw you a picture?"

"No," Gentry said, "You don't. Hang up and let me push the panic button."

Inside of ten minutes Gentry called back. "They've got her, Mike. She's a little groggy, but okay otherwise. I'm having her taken to your office like you said."

"Thank God, Will," Shayne said. "How about Foxy Grandpa? They nail him too?"

"Not yet," Gentry said. "He skipped out of there about a half an hour after the shooting. The boys will run him down yet, though,"

"How close were they to the shooting, Will?"

"You won't believe this, Mike, but if they'd been any closer they could have picked up the empty shells. He had her in the house right back of his place. There's an old woman lives there who has been friends with him for years. When he's too crippled up to move she goes through the yards and cooks his meals for him. She claims he told her Lucy was his sick grandneice.

"Of course we don't have to swallow that fairy tale, but I don't blame her much. At least she took good care of your girl—didn't threaten her, let alone hurt her. Kind old soul. Looks like when she was lots younger she might have been somebody's grandmother."

"If she didn't hurt Lucy, I don't blame either of them," Shayne said. "I guess if I was old and sick and rotting in one of those termite-riddled rabbit hutches and somebody dangled a half million under my nose, I'd think up fairy tales too."

"That reminds me, Shayne. What about that half million? I suppose now Lucy's safe the gleam in your eye will change to larceny as usual."

"You know that isn't so, Will. I don't have that half million. I don't know who has any more than you do."

"Don't waste your time being sorry for me, Mike," Gentry said. "Whatever that loot is it's still loot. Whether it's cash or uncut sparklers or stolen negotiable bonds, it's not yours or mine for the picking up."

"Now, Will," Shayne protested. "You know me, I don't appropriate stolen goods. Of course, if I'm the one gets it back to the real owners, there's no harm in accepting a suitable reward, is there?"

"You listen to me," Gentry started to bellow. "If you figure out where that stuff is, you notify me. Let the proper authorities recover it all legal."

"Now you listen to me!" Shayne was starting to yell himself. "It's near midnight and I haven't eaten since breakfast. I've been shot at

and had my girl kidnaped and half ruined myself doing pratt falls that would scare a judo boy. A killer I never heard of is whetting his knife for me right now. So on top of all that do I have to listen to friends threaten me? You got six hundred men and two computers and the F.B.I. files to find that stuff with if it exists at all. So go find it. If it turns out I'm smarter than your whole crew put together, don't grudge the laborer his hire."

He hung up before the Chief could think of an answer.

"That's telling him, boy," Tim Rourke said over the rim of his glass. "You want me to figure out for you where the stuff is?"

"I know where it is," Shayne said impatiently. "What I don't know is what it is and how to get it away safely."

That was when the police siren wailed its way to a stop at the curb outside the office and the two grinning prowl cops brought Lucy Hamilton up the stairs.

Shayne put his arm around her and they went into the back office together and closed the door.

"They want to be alone," Rourke said needlessly to the cops. "Sit down, boys, and let me mix you a drink."

"Just a drop of branch water on the side. No mixing," said the elder of the two.

When Mike Shayne and Lucy Hamilton came out together a few minutes later she was almost her usual self.

"They didn't really hurt me," she said to Rourke. "The first two gave me sedatives, but the woman was afraid to over-dose and it's been wearing off for hours now. The old man told me he thought Mike would try to fool Georgie, and then Georgie would be mad. So he took me across the yard to his friend, Mrs. Mary. She was sweet. Made me eat some hot chicken soup she had.

"Afterwards, when we heard the shots, she made us all lie down on the floor for safety. Then the old man went out. He said he was going to try and find Mike and bring him to me, but he didn't come back. Afterwards the police came. Mrs. Mary didn't try to lock me up or hide me from them. She just said not to be too hard on her for what she'd done."

"Nobody will file any charges against her," Shayne said "She'll be held without bail as a material witness—for her own protection really—till this is over. That's all."

"Now that we've got that out of the way—" Tim Rourke said pointedly.

"I've told Lucy I'm going to try to find the old man," Shayne said.

"Not that I believe him for a minute," Lucy said. "He's going after that terrible Deacon person of course."

"I swear the first thing I'll do is find the old man," Shayne said.

"You and Tim stay here with these two boys for guards for a while. Don't either of you go out. If that Joanie calls you, Tim, you bring her in, but have Will give you a couple of detectives for protection when you go out."

"Oh, look, Mike," Rourke said. "I know my way around this town."

"Sure you do, Tim, but this Deacon's no home-town boy. He killed one man tonight and they can't hang him any higher if he makes it two."

"Why rush right off?" Lucy asked. "Let me send out for some dinner for you."

"I'm late now, Angel," Shayne said. "I've got to assume this Dea con is smart enough to figure out what I can. He's got the ring and he knows whatever Georgie told him before he died. I'm going to have to move fast from now on to keep ahead of him."

VII

MIKE SHAYNE wanted to get his hands on the crippled old man he called Foxy Grandpa. Of course the whole Miami police force was looking for him too, but Shayne wasn't worried about that. He figured that he'd have a better idea where to look than they did.

"He's old and crippled," Shayne told himself. "He can't go far. At the same time he's smart. He won't do anything obvious or stupid. His problem is to put himself where the

Deacon can't give him a dose of hollow ground cough medicine, but I can find him."

All the time he was driving north towards the house where Lucy Hamilton had been held Shayne tried to think as a tired and pain-wracked old man would have done.

He parked the car a couple of blocks east of the house itself and went the rest of the way on foot, being very careful in case the Deacon or someone in his pay was on watch. Once he stepped into a clump of Florida Holly bush to let a police car go by. The car was cruising at low speed and without siren or blue light operating.

At the right block he got into the yards in back of the houses and made his way to Mother Mary's at the minor cost of barking one shin on the remnants of what had once been a picket fence.

Shayne kept in the shadows even after he was reasonably sure there was no one in either of the two houses where Lucy had been. He spotted a police stake-out, a detective he knew, sitting on a bus bench at the corner to the right of Mother Mary's. Foxy could have gone that way and taken a bus to any part of the City. On the other hand, the bus driver would have been sure to remember him struggling to get up the stairs and down the aisle.

Shayne went the other way, to his left as he faced north. The first cross street was so narrow as to be little more than an alley. The next block appeared to be a short one. As Shayne proceeded he saw that the narrow street, as frequently happens in the older sections of Miami, had not been cut completely through the block. Instead it dead-ended in a thick tangle of weeds, brush and full grown trees that probably hadn't changed a great deal since the last Tequesta Indian came by in search of deer. The paved street ended here, but neighborhood kids had worn a narrow foot path into and through the tangle.

"That's where I'd have gone if I was him." Shayne thought. "It's the way I'd have had to go if I wanted cover where I could still be found by the right man at the right time."

The burly detective didn't try to sneak into the miniature jungle. There'd be no point in trying to stalk his man. Shayne knew he was no Indian. His big shoes would crumple and crack the twigs and dead brush under foot and his clothes would catch and pull the growth. He had about as much chance of moving soundlessly in that stuff as a full grown rhino would have had. He knew it so he didn't try.

The tract was about two hundred feet by a hundred, or a bit under half an acre. Even at night he figured to cover it without too much trouble. Shayne walked on in.

Fifteen minutes later he was still blundering blindly through the tangle. He was sweating and angry. His suit had been torn by thorns. His shoes were greasy and smelly from trampling sacks of garbage tossed into the brush by lazy neighbors. He'd begun to wonder if it wasn't a hopeless task after all.

"Good evening, Mr. Shayne," said a voice he thought he recognized. "I'd been hoping you would happen along."

Shayne spun in a complete circle, automatically pulling his gun. He could see no one, not even make out the trees or brush clearly in the heavy darkness.

The voice spoke again. "You men of action seem to think a gun answers everything. What use is it now? If I really was the Deacon, you'd be dead long before you could see me."

"If you kept on talking," Shayne said, "sooner or later I'd shoot at the sound of your voice and hit you too."

"Score one for your side, Mr. Shayne. My side tends to over-rate words the way you do deeds."

"Now that it's a tie, where are you?"

"Look up, Shayne," the voice said. "When in doubt, look to the stars. I read that someplace long ago."

Shayne did, but he could see nothing but the heavy leaf masses of the trees and vines.

"I don't blame you," the voice said. "From down there I don't think I could see either. Take about three short steps to your left. You'll hit a tree. See? Now feel around the trunk with your hands. You'll find wooden cleats nailed on. If you climb them you can join me on a good strong platform. The neighborhood boys built this place as a clubhouse. A tree house, if you're technical. I think we can talk safely up here — at least as long as it's dark."

"Before I come up, who are you?"

"Surely you know that, Mr. Shayne. I'm the voice that spoke about half a million dollars. I'm the hand that took your little lady out of the Deacon's way. Surely you've a name for me?"

"I call you Foxy Grandpa," Shayne said, "after an old cartoon friend."

There was a laugh of genuine amusement. "It's as good a name as any. Come on up. There's lot to say and not much time to say it in."

Shayne climbed. About ten feet off the ground he found a platform of planks and two-by-fours, roofed over against the rain. He swung himself over the side and sat down. He could see the dark blur that was the other man, but that was all.

"In case you're wondering," the voice said, "you can put away your gun. My only weapon is an intangible one. Besides I want to be on your side."

"If that's so, who is the Deacon?"

"Not so fast. Not so fast. First I need to know that you want me on your side. I have a price, you know."

"What's the price? Half?"

"Oh no, Mr. Shayne. I'm just an old man. I want enough to buy a decent life for Mary and myself for the years we have left. They won't be many. I'm seventy-eight years old, Mr. Shayne. This is my last adventure."

"And your last chance, you mean," Shayne said.

"My last chance. Exactly. So you can see why I don't want to spoil everything by being greedy. Twenty thousand dollars will be plenty. That is of course, if you recover the treasure with my help. And if we both survive. In the long run of course I have to trust your word."

"Because your only weapon is

secrecy and you will have given that up when we talk." Shayne said.

"I may as well say that I'm much more inclined to trust you after talking with your young lady. She's a very fine woman, and she says you can be trusted. Her word carries weight with me."

"With me too, Foxy," Shayne said. "Okay, twenty thousand at least. More if the take is big enough. In any case a fair split. You've my word on it. Now who's this Deacon?"

"A killer," Foxy said. "You must understand now that I haven't seen him myself or even heard him talk. I know what I heard George say to him on the phone, and about him to the woman. I only have one side of the conversation to go by. But, Mr. Shayne, when a man can't get around much he has ample time to think. He sharpens his mind all the time."

"Ah," Shayne said. "That's what I like. A thinker. The thinkers own this world, old man."

"George Burger was no thinker," the man said. "The Deacon is. He's not a native of this country. Possibly this is his first trip here. In his own country they frighten children with his name."

"Then why did he use a fool like Georgie?" Shayne asked.

"It was a connection. Some of George's relatives had worked for this man in Europe. Besides he thought his own luck would work for his lieutenants. When a man believes his own legend, he takes stupid chances. Even a smart man sometimes."

"Tell me the rest of it."

"This Deacon wanted to bring into America something of great value. The figure of five hundred thousand dollars was used more than once. He wasn't extablished here yet so he had to work through people who were and whom he couldn't completely control. They were to bring in this property of his through their own channels and put it in a safe place. Then they would deliver to George, as the Deacon's agent, a key that would enable him to recover the merchandise."

"That's about the way I had it figured. The key was the ring, of course."

"Of course. A key to wealth and happiness."

"For Georgie a key to death."

"So the radio told me, Mr. Shayne. A key to unlock his coffin. What happened? When George left the house he expected you to give him the ring. Did you read the riddle for yourself and change it for him?"

"Not quite," Shayne said. "I figured it was a riddle, but I couldn't read it then. So I just changed it so it wouldn't mean what it was supposed to for Georgie either."

"Clever," the old man said. "Clever. I should have known you would do something of the sort. So now only you know what the message was. I suppose you've deciph-

ered its meaning by now. A clever man like you, Mr. Shayne?"

"It wasn't that hard," Shayne said. He got a cigar out of his pocket and fumbled for a match.

"Please," the other man said. "No lights up here. He'll be looking for both of us still. Do you think he knows you know the secret?"

"I think he's smart enough to figure that out," Shayne said. "He must know who I am by now. He'll know he has to come to me now. There's no other out for him."

"Why can't he just contact the people who sent the ring and ask for a repeat of the message - the code?"

"It's isn't a code," Shayne said. "You must have guessed that by now. It's a key, or at least the combination to open a safe or similar lock, and they won't give it to him twice. They were paid to deliver the stuff and they did. If he doesn't pick it up on schedule, they'll take it back. These aren't nice people, old man, and half a million dollars is a lot of temptation. By the way, what is it, diamonds or dope?"

"The way they talked it's dope," the old man said. "I think uncut morphine refined in the Midi. Enough to establish the Deacon as a power in this country of yours."

"Logical," the big detective said. "Not bulky and negotiable anywhere in the world. Better than currency. Now one thing more. I know about where the lock is I have to open. It would be a help if you had over-

heard enough to tell me exactly where."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne, but that is too much to expect. Georgie was almost a total fool, but not quite. I have only a clue, if it's worth anything to you. A phrase was used more than once. Under three angels. That's about as close as I can come. I hope it helps."

"Yes," the redhead said. "It helps. I can go it from there. I'd better get moving now. The faster I move the less time he has to think."

"Aren't you afraid of him?" the man said in a quiet voice. "Not even a little afraid? All sorts of people fear that man. Can it be that you are the exception?"

"Of course I'm concerned," Shayne admitted. "I'm wary of any poisonous reptile, but I've killed a lot of them in my time. Besides I've got the edge this time. I know he's

coming. He has to come to me. The only thing that could give him an edge would be to surprise me, and I'm warned and waiting. Do you want to come along?"

"You know I don't. I can only walk with a crutch. I'd only be a handicap to you. When you get the package bring it back here, Shayne. I'll be safe here. Then we can decide on the next steps."

"I think you're right. I'll get going. By the way, why did you let Lucy go when you had her to hold over my head? I'd have danced to your whistle as long as you held her you know."

"I wanted you to trust me," the old voice said. "You're much to dangerous a man to hold by any other leash than trust. I don't underrate you at all."

"Why thank you, Foxy Grandpa," Shayne said. "And a peaceful rest to you."

He got down out of the tree with some difficulty. The brush tore at his clothes and almost tripped him a couple of times but he made it back to the street. He made his way back to his car by a circuitous route which took him past a public pay phone booth in front of a drug and sundry store.

The first call he made was to Miami Police Headquarters.

"Where in the hades have you been?" Will Gentry said into the phone. "I've been losing the sleep I need waiting for you to call. Come on in here."

"I can't," Shayne said. "I'm busy. I'm up in the area where the action was. It isn't here any more, Will. Pull your men out of the north side. I want this neighborhood so open a circus parade could go through without a cop seeing it."

"You're crazy," Gentry said. "What gives you the notion that section's quiet now?"

"I climbed a tree and a little bird told me," Shayne said. "Don't argue with me, Will. I've got this case just about wound up. Just sit tight and I'll drop it in your lap."

"I'm trying to tell you, Mike. Keep out of it. We think we have it ourselves. The Feds are after a big dope shipment. They'll get it when they raid the boys who brought it in. You interfere now and you're just asking for a suite in the Whiskers Hotel. So don't be a fathead. If you think you've got anything, for God's sake turn it over to us."

"My old mother," Shayne said, "used to tell me if I wanted anything done right to do it myself. She was a real smart woman."

"Mike, I'm begging you. This isn't just a local case. Now it's international. People are in it I can't make sit still, for your wild Irish games. You got Lucy back already. Don't get greedy and get your hands burned. How can you know more about this than the whole U.S. government?"

"I already told you that," Shayne said. "A little bird told me."

He hung up the phone before Will Gentry could think of an answer to that one.

His next call was to an unlisted phone in the government owned office building on Biscayne Boulevard. It was a phone that was manned on a twenty-four hour, three hundred and sixty-five days a year basis. The girl who answered put him through to a man who'd seen Shayne get results in other cases.

"Suppose," the detective asked, "that I could deliver you half a million dollars in uncut morphine all wrapped and sealed, plus the man who was supposed to pick it up on this side of the water. In that case would I get a ten percent reward?"

"Do you have it now?" the man asked.

"I don't," Shayne said. "I think I know where it is, and if I'm right, the man called Deacon will jump right into my pocket."

"You aren't trying to jump the gun on us?"

"On your raid, Mr. Smith? Not a bit of it. You won't find the stuff there, because they haven't got it. They can't finger the Deacon for you either. They've never seen him. Suppose I give you both, all wrapped up with red ribbon?"

"We pay rewards, Shayne," Mr. Smith said.

"I'm claiming ten percent," the redhead said, and put the phone back on its cradle. He knew and trusted the man to whom he had spoken.

VIII

MIKE SHAYNE made his way back to his car and drove south. On the off chance that Will Gentry might put out a pick-up order to keep him out of trouble he made a wide detour to the west of the most direct route. He was sure now that there was no special need to hurry, and he wanted to give the Deacon plenty of time to figure out what Shayne was up to. Timing was still important in this case, but it was more like the timing of one of Robert E. Lee's strategic concepts —a matter of the convergence of different forces upon a single point.

After some thought he called his office. Tim Rourke answered the phone.

"Hail, maestro," he said. "What are you up to now? Will called and said if you came in here we were to lock you in the closet till he sent word to let you out."

"He's just trying to make me feel good," Shayne said. "What else is new?"

"What else is a call from your number two girl, the beautiful bolita baroness."

"B.J.? What did she want?"

"She wants a word with you, and pronto," Rourke said. "She said her boys picked up something that may make all the difference to you. Wouldn't tell me what it was. I think she figures I'm featherbrained or something. Anyway she said you

could get her at home any time tonight."

"Thanks, Tim. I'll call her. How's Lucy doing?"

"She's fast asleep on the cot in the back office. Poor kid's worn out. Even the phone didn't wake her. Will's two lads and I are playing draw poker to keep awake and standing guard. Don't worry about her."

"I won't," Shayne said.

He dialed B. J.'s private number, and she must have been waiting for the call, because she answered on the second ring.

"Mike? I'm glad you called. I've had my boys pumping the grapevine all afternoon. Mostly they drew blank. Apparently nobody in town has ever seen this Deacon.

"I've got just two items of interest. Georgie Burger's girl took a plane for New York around midnight. The word is she was scared stiff and running."

"That would be right after the news of Georgie's death hit the radio," Shayne said. "Well, I hope she makes it. She'd be no more use to me here anyway."

"The other item," Betty Jane told him, "is something one of my smartest boys brought in. He says there's a report the Deacon didn't just hit town today. He's said to have been here a couple of weeks at least. That means he must have gotten to Miami before Georgie Burger did. Georgie came over from Tampa just a week ago. It sounded screwy to me, but I figured you ought to know."

"You were dead right, beautiful," Shayne said. "It is important. It nails the case shut once and for all."

"I'm glad," she said. "More glad than you know. Take care of yourself, you big lug."

"Why?" he asked. "Has the Deacon got a contract out on me yet?"

"That's funny," she said. "He hasn't. I'd have thought he would. He must know how deep you are in this by now."

"He does know," Shayne said. "That's why he doesn't want me killed for a while yet. If I go, his whole game goes with me. He figures to wait and take me himself after I'm no use to him any more. Thanks and goodby, beautiful."

"I wish you meant it." She hung up.

Shayne drove as straight as he could, which wasn't very straight in view of the manner in which new expressways had torn up the central city. He had to detour through side streets and sometimes alleyways past the big complex of hospitals and government buildings and then across northwest Seventh Ave. into and through the old slum districts.

He drove with great care. A blown tire or minor accident could bring gangs of muggers out of the darkness. As long as he kept moving with windows up and doors locked he was reasonable sure of not being bothered.

He passed a bar where a squad

of Gentry's men, with two trained German shepherd dogs, were shaking down the drinkers for illegal weapons. The dogs circled the knot of young men and girls and herded them like sheep. Two had already been handcuffed and loaded into the police van. Faces watched from windows all along the block.

Shayne finally found a parking spot close to the western entrance where he'd given Joanie the ring hours before. He figured once he got in among the graves he'd be reasonably safe. The juveniles in this part of town retained an age old fear of graveyards.

This time he avoided the main roadway through the cemetery and stayed well back in the shadows of the oaks. The reflected glare of downtown city lights on an overhanging layer of smog still gave more light than he liked. After a few minutes he could make out most detail except in the thickest patches of the shadows.

He could see where he was going without much trouble and even make out the names carved in the headstones.

The trouble was there still patches of near-total darkness big enough for a man to hide himself in if he kept very still and refrained from smoking.

"He'll be in one of those," Shayne told himself, "coiled down and quiet like a snake under a rock. He can see me coming long before I'm

near him. The only way I can find him is to come so close that he knows for sure I've seen him, and if I do that I'll have blown the whole game for sure."

For a man his size Shayne was light and quiet on his feet. He moved from patch to patch of shadow like a drift of smoke. Years before he'd learned the Indian rule of watching where each foot would fall every time he took a step.

He gave up looking for the man he was sure would be in ambush.

"I'd best find the stuff first," he thought. "Deacon won't show his hand till I do. As soon as he knows I've got it though he'll come in for the kill for sure. I think he'll be

alone. I'm betting on it. Betting my life."

The fronts of the mausoleums built as family tombs by the more affluent of Miami's boom-time families mostly faced on the central roadway. The majority were built of native stone, grey blocks of rotten limestone further darkened by the smoke and grime of a great city. One or two were of imported marble, white to begin with but now almost equally dark.

He was beginning to think none of these would show the marks he was looking for. Then he spotted it just about opposite the the spot where Joanie had stopped him before.

This was one of the marble tombs, and bigger than most. There were stained-glass windows, eerie in the reflected light, and bronze doors in front. The windows were iron grilled against vandals and the heavy doors would have defied a battering ram.

Above the doors the marble was carved in a decorative frieze showing an archangel holding a wreath and flanked by a smaller angel on each side.

"Under the three angels," Shayne thought. "Foxy steered me right."

This spot would certainly be watched. There was no use in trying to hide so he walked right up to the doors. He could almost feel the unseen watcher tense as he was recognized. It was almost impossible to resist the urge to look over his shoulder and try to spot the hidden killer, but somehow Shayne succeeded.

The lock on the doors, as he'd known it would be, was an old fashioned combination type, probably a duplicate of the one on the builder's office safe.

It was too dark to make out the numbers on the heavy bronze dial in front, but the lock was oiled and clicked lightly as Shayne spun the wheel.

He set it at zero. He counted the clicks. Three right. Then back to zero and six to the left. Zero again and nineteen to the right. Then twelve left.

There was a louder snap of metal, and when Shayne turned the door handle the tumblers let go and the big door moved a little on its well-oiled hinges.

Before he went in Shayne looked at the name moulded in bronze on the door. Its owner had been famous nationally as well as locally, but no single member of the family still lived in south Florida. The hoods had only to learn the combination from the unguarded records in the cemetery office and take over the mausoleum as a sort of supersized safe for their own purposes.

"If the man who built this place knew, he'd come out of the grave after them," Shayne said. "Well, here we go."

He pushed back the big door and walked into the cold and empty crypt within. It was easy to get in.

He wondered if it would be possible to get out. He was in a bottle now with an assassin where the cork should be. Shayne gave a sardonic grin. He was used to long chances, but this was one of the longest he'd ever taken.

Most men would have called Will Gentry and the F.B.I. and had them raid the tomb with him. They could have gotten the smuggled dope easily enough, but the Deacon would have gone to ground at once. The chances were good he'd get himself out of the country to safety long before the authorities even knew who they were tracking.

Shayne wanted the Deacon. Above everything else he wanted the man who'd dared to have Lucy Hamilton kidnaped, who would certainly have had her killed if it had suited his aims.

He wanted the Deacon badly enough to risk his own life on the chance that, at the ultimate instant, he could outfight as well as outthink that shadowy figure of death.

As he came through the bronze doors of the mausoleum Shayne found himself facing a sort of altar under the stained glass window at the far end of the single room. The original owner and his wife were buried under this altar. There was a wooden prie dieu covered with tattered velvet in front of it. Other members of the family were buried, one above the other on either side. Their names and dates were carved into the marble of the slabs.

Two of these niches still contained no coffins. Instead of being cemented in place their blank marble covers were merely leaned against the wall. When Shayne lifted down the first of these he found what he was looking for. It was an oblong package weighing several pounds and wrapped securely in heavy canvas.

Under the outer wrapping Shayne knew there'd be another of rubber or heavy plastic sheeting, and then smaller bundles, also doubly wrapped to make them secure and waterproof. In case of need or emergency such a package could be weighted or sunk in a river or harbor to be retrieved later on when it was safe.

The big redhead wasted no time. Approaching the big tomb, his ambushers had obviously been waiting with tensed nerves for him to come out. They'd fired at the first thing they saw, without taking the trouble to identify it as a package instead of a man. To do that they'd had to momentarily point their guns away from the door of the tomb. For a bare second or two they had to be off balance and unready for him.

When he had to Mike Shayne could be as fast and deadly as one of the big jungle, cats. He came out of the door at a run, and crouched down as low as he could. He put both feet against against the topmost of the three marble steps to give himself kicking leverage, and dived through a patch of ornamental

shrubbery surrounding the next in line of the buildings. He knew it was empty of life and would offer good cover.

He moved to the open bronze door with the heavy package in his arms and then raised it above his head. With all his strength he hurled the dope through the open doors and across the twenty feet of intervening space to the patch of srubbery he'd selected. It bounced once, and rolled under cover.

Almost as the package cleared the doorway shots rang out. The bundle was hit at least once, but was too heavy to be diverted from its arc by the small calibre bullet.

Shayne had expected the possibility of a single shot. After all, what better time for an ambushed Deacon to gun him down? That was why he'd tossed out the bundle as a decoy.

This hadn't been one man shooting, but a regular volley. At least four men had fired, as nearly as he could tell. To stay where he was now was impossible. A couple of them would drive him back from the door with rapid fire while the others ran in and retrieved the dope. He knew he couldn't stop them. No one man could.

He still had one bare chance if he could move fast enough headfirst for the safety of the bushes.

Shayne had been right. The men were just a bit too slow in reacting to his rush. Their first shots went through the open doors after he'd emerged. Then they had to swing their guns back in a new direction and try to take aim.

In the dim light it wasn't easy. They were using guns designed for murder at close range, automatics without proper sights and made highly inacurate by loose-fitting barrels, slides and other moving parts. On top of that they were untrained as marksmen and shooting fast under stress of excitement.

Under those conditions they couldn't have hit a man standing still to make a target once out of ten aimed shots. To have hit Shayne before he managed to roll under cover would have been a real miracle. The only thing he really had to fear was the chance of a stray shot hitting him by accident. He rolled for the bushes as fast as he could.

Shayne made it. He was under cover and with a heavy grey stone wall at his back. There had been four men covering the mausoleum of the three angels. One had been so far to the right that his line of aim was now blocked by the building against which the big detective crouched.

A second had run over to the far side of the building from which Shayne had emerged. He made the mistake of peering around to see if the detective had been hit, and exposed himself in the process.

Shayne's big .45 boomed and the heavy .300 grain slug broke the man's shoulder and flattened him,

paralyzed from shock and bleeding, on the ground. He wasn't dead, but he was out of that particular fight.

Shayne was a trained marksman. His big gun had been specially worked on by an expert gunsmith, and he'd practiced with it constantly over the years at the police range. He wasn't worried about his ability to handle the two men remaining in front of him. He had both of them spotted by the flashes their guns had made.

They were on the other side of the central roadway, one at the corner of a mausoleum and the other in a clump of bushes around a headstone. These were good positions from which to cover the door Shayne had come out of, but too far from his new position.

Either one would have to expose himself to take a shot at Shayne where he was now forted up.

The only real danger now was the man out of sight to Shayne's left. If he could sneak up and come around either corner of the building at the detective's back there was a chance he could get in a fatal or disabling shot. There wasn't much of anything the redhead could do to stop him from trying. Nobody can watch out in three directions at once. He just had to be ready to shoot fast if anything happened.

"Let me talk to the Deacon," Shayne yelled. "Maybe we can make a deal."

It was the man farthest away in front who answered. "Just throw out your gun, shamus, and come out after it with your hands up. You can walk right on out the gate. It ain't you we want and you know it."

"I can't trust your word," Shayne called back. He was sparring for time. If these weren't the Deacon's men, then who were they? And where was the killer himself?

"Who are you?" he shouted.

"Never mind that, Shayne," the voice answered. "Why should we want to kill you and get your pal Gentry on our tail? That stuff you heisted is worth money. Your carcass ain't. Take a couple of minutes to think it over, but that's all you get. After that we come and take you."

"If you could do that at all, you'd have done it just now," Shayne said. "This is a Mexican stand off, boys, and I want a deal. Let's talk."

"You've got two minutes," came the reply.

Shayne used the time to think. These were local boys and apparently not in the Deacon's pay. In that case they were probably the same ones who'd smuggled in the dope and put it in the tomb in the first place. They could have heard via the grapevine that Shayne and the Deacon were tangling, and decided to take back the dope for themselves.

They must have arrived in the cemetery just in time to see Shayne go into the tomb. Otherwise they'd have opened the door themselves, since they already had the combi nation."

Of course their other man was sneaking up on him from behind right now.

Shayne cursed his luck. He'd figured on forcing the Deacon's hand by picking up the morphine himself. Once the mystery man came out in the open, Mike Shayne was ready to deal with him. He hadn't figured on fighting a battle with these four men first. Whoever won, the shooting could scare the Deacon off so the detective would never again have a chance at him.

There was a shot and a wild yell from behind the tomb against which Shayne crouched.

"Look out," the yell sounded. "Help. Oh God, help." and then a bloodcurdling scream.

The man stalking Shayne from behind had run into more than he could handle. The two in front of him evidently decided to give up at that point. They broke an ran for the gate, dodging among the trees and headstones for cover. Shayne put a shot over their heads to speed them.

Then he whirled and went around the corner of the building at his back. He was still hunched down almost on hands and knees to keep the cover of the shrubbery. That was all that saved his life.

As he came round the corner something whirled through the air with terrific force only a couple of inches above his head. There was a crash and crack of wood shattering against the stone corner of the tomb, and Shayne scrambled and made a perfect football tackle of the dark form that had waited for him.

It wasn't much of a struggle. The man was thin and light. Shayne got astride him easily enough and pinned him down. He got out his pocket flash and lit it.

"You can get off me now, Mr. Shayne," the old man said. "I'm sorry. I thought you were one of them."

"Foxy Grandpa," Shayne said. "What kept you so long, Foxy?"

"I don't know what you're saying," the man said. "I followed you down—or rather came down, in case the Deacon's people were too many for you. It's a good thing I did, I think. I just saved your life."

Shayne stood up. He still kept his gun in his right hand and shone the little flash over towards the body of the hoodlum who had been stalking him.

"You're quite a fighter for a poor old cripple, Foxy," he said. "That crutch nearly got me. Or should I call you Deacon?"

The body on the ground twisted and the right hand came up with something that glittered in the light. Shayne slapped his big foot down over the frail old wrist and then leaned over and picked up the knife from the ground. There was blood on the blade.

"I could tell by the scream you were knifing that hood," Shayne said. "Not that I needed that tip-off. I had you spotted for sure in the tree house, but I wanted you to make it certain by tailing me down here. You came along right on schedule."

"You're insane," the old man said.

"No," Shayne told him. "Not me. Maybe you are. You clever people always outsmart yourselves. You just knew too much for somebody who'd only overheard one side of some phone calls. You were supposed to be a helpless old nothing, and you thought like a cop.

"You came to Miami weeks ahead of your morphine and took over that house and the one behind it for a blind. I suppose we'll find the real owner buried someplace in that tangle around the tree house. You either brought the old woman with you or bought or threatened her into helping you. Then you brought in Georgie and his woman to make the actual pick-up for you and run all the risk. Georgie couldn't betray you, because he never knew who you really were. You talked to him as Deacon only from a pay phone outside.

"You did it clever. Too clever. If you'd just had the stuff delivered to you off the boat, none of this would have happened. I couldn't have had the ring. Georgie couldn't have fouled things up and had to be killed. It wouldn't have gone sour. Everthing was easy except you got so clever, old man."

"What happens now?" the old man said. "Are you going to kill me for the morphine?"

"No," Shayne said. "No, old man, I'm not stupid and greedy like you. I'm going to turn this stuff, and you with it, over to the authorities and be satisfied with the fifty thousand dollars reward. I do things the easy way."

"I guess you do," the Deacon said. "Tell me one thing, Shayne. When did you really know? What did I do wrong?"

"I was pretty sure before," Mike Shayne said, "but it was in the tree. You called America 'your country' —meaning mine—instead of our country. Then I knew for sure."

DEATH OF A KING

It was a daft, deadly game they played, the runaway hood and the kill-crazy genius. For they were the pawns, Murder was King — and in chess there can be only one winner.

by JERRY JACOBSON

BURT VALLIANT was running, running from Vince Zarelli, his gangland employer for whom he had stolen in the past, and from whom he had stolen in the present. You didn't hang around and wait for Zarelli to retaliate. You ran and hoped the city would swallow you up and hide your exit.

The ship was the passenger liner *Americana II*, destined for London. At the base of the gangplank Burt Valliant nervously presented tickets to the ship's third officer while he scanned the faces jammed in at the ship's railing.

He sought two faces in particular: the drawn, weathered face of a New York factory foreman named Karl Shullenberg; and the bony, anemic face of his fourteen-year-old son Paul. The strings Valliant had left to pull had all but run out.

The Shullenbergs represented Burt Valliant's last grasp. He didn't see their faces, but a last check of

A STARTLINGLY DIFFERENT NOVELET

the passenger list for confirmed passengers revealed they were on board. If they hadn't, Valliant might just as well take this ship off the edge of the world.

Valliant went straight to his cabin, B-22, one flight below the opulence of A-Deck. He sensed the Shullenbergs would be quartered on C-Deck. They probably had dug deep into savings for this crazy trip, would be cutting corners all the way to Germany to do this incredible thing. It was even more incredible than Burt Valliant's attempt to run from Zarelli. And that was foolishly incredible.

In his cabin Valliant found immediate evidence of Vince Zarelli's presence, a note propped up on the rough-hewn Danish bureau. Valliant smiled painfully. Vince Zarelli's thumb was indeed huge and mobile.

Dear Burt:

A sudden trip for your health? I hope not. I hope it is an honest attempt to bring the scales back into balance.

I don't want you to experience the queer lonesomeness an American tourist gets abroad, so I've arranged for a travelling companion. We aren't sure what it is with you yet, Burt, but with him this is strictly business.

The figure, as you will recall, is $40,000 *and the due-date March* 23rd. *No excuses accepted. And no extensions. If you fail me, Burt, today's look will be your last at the Statue of Liberty. Bon Voyage. (Signed) Vince Zarelli.*

Valliant took a labored breath and ran his eyes down the page to a brief postscript:

P. S.—Incidentally, a tinkertoy savings and loan association was robbed last Thursday, Burt. Ten thousand dollars was taken without the presentation of a withdrawal slip. Artist's sketch of the thief appeared in the next ayem's paper. The guy could be your exact twin. Take care, Burt. If you're tapped for this job, you can kiss the rest of your life goodby. V. Z.

Up to now it had not been much of a life to kiss off. Numbers running, protection, private forays against the law with brief periods in prison for repayment. Mired in the basement of Zarelli's empire was like selling work clothes in the bargain basement of a department store. Burt knew what was keeping him down, why the elevators going up were always full. He was too impetuous, too reluctant to take orders, too much of an individualist in an era of teamwork and corporate images. He was like the pro basketball player who went from team to team because he couldn't grasp the program and was always grasping and hugging the ball. The era of the hotshot had ended.

Now, temporarily, Valliant was

back doing things the way he liked them, singly, with no one to depend on and no one to blame but himself.

As for the current program, he had that pretty well down. It centered wholly around Karl Shullenberg and his son, the former escorting the latter to a remote village in Bavaria for the purpose of challenging at chess a man named Henrik Rhoedorf, an aging genius who still was one of the top-ranked international players in the world.

They were going uninvited, a thing rarely done in international master circles. Either both father and son had fallen into total insanity, or they knew precisely what they were doing. In Valliant's current difficult circumstances he preferred to—had to—believe in the latter.

Of course, the boy's genius at chess was well-known and substantiated around the factory district where the father worked and the family lived. Paul Shullenberg was called The Little Killer by those he had played and beaten in swift matches in the Dock Cafe and the Longshoreman's Cards and Billiards and Polhaski's Diner. The father hauled him around like a brilliant monkey on a string, making small wagers on him at great odds and always cashing in the winner. The boy took on all comers—wayfaring seamen who had matched themselves against good players in all corners of the world, young college wizards loading ships on the docks for tuition money, anybody and everybody who was ego-crazy and foolish enough to put up his money and take a seat across the table from Paul Shullenberg.

It was true that Paul Shullenberg had never played a public match against players of stature or proven ability. But the excitement of his hunch didn't diminish in the face of this unknown factor. One fact stood out as clear as the implied death if Valliant should fail: these two wouldn't be traipsing all over Europe if the kid didn't stand a good chance to win.

Still and all, Valliant harbored doubts. Paul Shullenberg was no doubt a wizard at chess, but just how good? And how did the senior Shullenberg plan to pull off this business of challenging an international master?

The second day at sea, Valliant did the one thing he had to do: confront Karl Shullenberg in person for answers. He found him occupying a deck chair on the warmer side of the ship, a towel sausage-rolled across his eyes to keep out the harsh rays of a late morning sun. When Valliant slipped into the chair next to Shullenberg the rolled towel moved. A hand rose lanquidly and plucked the towel away. The weathered face frowned.

"Yes, I thought I spotted you in a corridor yesterday." Shullenberg's tone was not pleasant. "No, I don't

want to buy tickets to the Mafia Ball."

"You know me," Valliant said.

"I've seen you and I know of you," Shullenberg corrected. "You used to run numbers in the factory district and punch shopkeepers for insurance premiums. One of Vince Zarelli's nickel-and-dime errand boys. Or used to be. They say you're in some trouble with your boss over money."

"A minor thing," said Valliant. "I wouldn't let it worry you."

"Your presence within fifty miles of me worries me," said Shullenberg. "They say you ran off with the bag. Booking a little soccer and football on the side. You people never learn. One can only hope that some day each of you will get caught stealing from the other and that you'll all kill each other off in a mass gun fight."

Valliant took the abuse without retaliation. He needed Shullenberg's friendship now, not his antagonism.

"Well, I don't imagine you're taking this trip for your health," said Shullenberg. "Or to broaden your horizons through travel. You're out chasing another scheme to pay back the—how much do you owe?"

"Forty thousand," said Valliant.

"Pain," Shullenberg whispered. "You people thrive on it, feed off it like a piece of beef steak on a bone. And you must have been issued a time limit. That's the way it's always done in the gangster films."

"March 23rd," Valliant answered.

Shullenberg pulled out a black bowled pipe with a white stem and began stuffing it with tobacco.

"Two weeks," he mused. "Not much of a loan on your life. A little bit of sand draining through an hour glass." Shullenberg smiled. "A little bit of sand always seems to run away quicker than a lot, eh Valliant?"

"I've got a plan to buy my life back, so I'm not worried," Valliant told Shullenberg. "And I'll buy it back with interest."

"A plan. Valliant, your life has been a constant stream of faulty plans. Machines built always with one cog missing."

"This plan is perfect," said Valliant now, carefully. "The only cog missing from it is you."

Shullenberg chuckled. The pipe's bowl danced on his lip. "Yes, I've already figured out that much. I'm the only living thing on this ship you're acquainted with, if we exclude the rats in the hold. So, it must have something to do with the fact that I am taking Paul to Europe for a chess match. Am I right in that assumption?"

Valliant explained how he intended to bet on the boy against the German master, realize a killing on big odds. Not that Shullenberg seemed the least bit intrigued. He appeared to be dozing.

"Clever," he said when Valliant had finished. "Brilliant, even. Ex-

cept for one thing, like all your schemes. The vital cog. You still don't have it."

"Convince me your son will win and there's a cut in it for you," Valliant said. "Ten per cent. Twenty, if you like."

Shullenberg knocked the tobacco from his pipe and rose from his chair. 'I'll tell you what I'd like, Mr. Valliant," he said stiffly. "I'd like a short nap in my cabin. And I'd like for you to take a short walk on the open sea. If you'll excuse me."

Valliant watched as his chances shuffled off for the stairway nearby. Now there was just one alternative and it was the kind of alternative Valliant liked.

He caught up with Shullenberg at the top of the stairwell and jammed the pistol in his back.

"Going down, Shullenberg. I'm going with you."

"To my cabin? And what if I refuse."

"Then I'll kill you on the spot and take my chances."

"Solve all your problems with a pistol. Bang-bang makes everything all right."

"Move, Shullenberg."

"MY NAME IS Burt Valliant, Paul," Valliant explained to the slender boy sitting rigidly on the cabin's couch. In his lap was a tiny chess board. Bony hands continued to move like lightning through practice moves.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Valliant."

"I was acquainted with your father in the factory district, where I was a plant security guard. Because you just might become an international celebrity he thought it might be a good idea to hire a bodyguard."

There was a stiff formality in young Paul Shullenberg, almost as though he had already learned there were dangers in exposing his true feelings. The bony shoulders were rounded from too many hours hunched over chess boards and the face was a field of small jagged craters where pimples had risen flourished briefly, and then died.

"Is it true that Mr. Valliant is

going to be my bodyguard, father?" the boy asked.

Slowly and reluctantly, Karl Shullenberg said that was true. The threat of Valliant's pistol was still in his eyes. And Valliant would make sure that fearful gleam didn't vanish.

"Your father and I have been discussing your match with the German master," Valliant said, trying to trigger the boy into conversation that would give Valliant a clue as to the boy's chances for winning.

"He is the German national champion," Paul said. "Henrik Rhoedorf is his name."

The boy worked through another series of speedy moves, his hand and the pieces it moved blurs to Valliant's eyes. "He is the third ranking master in the world. He may very well be top-ranked when the new listings come out next month. The last few years his health was bad and he was dropped from the rankings. But since then he's regained his health and his stature."

"And maybe his ego as well," said Valliant. "What makes you think he'll even consent to play you?"

"I have a hunch about him," Paul said. "While it's true not many masters will jeopardize their status by playing a public match with an amateur, Rhoedorf doesn't fit the pattern of a master player. He doesn't live in one of the bigger cities, but in the village where he grew up. Playing chess there with the local butcher or the tailor is a social necessity. He may be an international master in the eyes of the world but to his neighbors he's just one of the locals who plays very good chess."

"So your chances of getting the match seem pretty good," Valliant said. "But what about your chances of beating him? Now, that's another matter entirely."

For a moment Paul Shullenberg let a sly smile linger on his lips, as if Valliant had made a big joke and didn't know it.

"Something funny, Paul?"

"Not hilarious, but funny, yes," the boy said. "Mr. Valliant, I've committed to memory every move of every public match Rhoedorf has ever played. In his matches certain very definite patterns appear, certain recurring responses to moves. Yes, I said *responses*. Rhoedorf is a positional player, a defensive player. I am a combinational player, an attacker. It's all mapped out. If he chooses not to respond to my attack then he will lose early. If he does, then the match will follow an inevitable course, a total of sixteen to twenty moves, ending with my consumption of his king from the rear."

Karl Shullenberg, thus far silent and submissive under the threat of Valliant's pistol, now decided to speak. His tone was low and controlled, but Valliant didn't mistake the anger lying in reserve.

"Paul, we've thoroughly discussed the use of that attack," he said. "And we are close to agreement that it shouldn't be employed."

"Close to," said Paul, "but not completely. If, once the match is underway, I see no danger in using it, then I will proceed to humiliate Herr Rhoedorf."

"Yes, and in the process, expose all your key pieces, just to appeal to the grandstand instincts of a handful of village idiots!"

"I'll play this match according to my instincts," Paul said tersely.

"You will play this match," Karl Shullenberg corrected, "according to the classic rules of chess, or not at all. Let me remind you that you are still a minor and subject to parental discretion and authority."

"And may I remind you, father, that without me your dream to have a master chess player in the family goes up in a puff of smoke. Mr. Bodyguard—let's go to lunch."

Before they left, Valliant suggested that for everyone concerned it might be best if Paul moved in with him for the duration of the crossing and the subsequent trip through Europe. They would get together in the afternoon so Valliant could be filled in on the full itinerary. Karl Shullenberg said a four-letter word under his breath. From here on out, Valliant would be calling all the shots.

LONDON. A thick early morning fog hugged at the city's ankles like a vast pair of gray socks. And hugging also, as Paul and Valliant wandered London streets during the two-hour layover before their steamer boarding up the North Sea to Bremerhaven, was a goon about the size and type Zarelli would have picked to do a job on Valliant. Always a half block away, or two doorways down, he wasn't being discreet about it at all. It was probably just the way the goon wanted it. Sometimes, thought Valliant, the fear of the known was just as great as the unknown.

Finally, in front of the window of an antique shop through which Paul admired an ivory chess set, he said to Valliant, "Did you know there was somebody following us? Big man. White silk tie on a white shirt. Black jewel tie-tack. Perpetual sneer. One gold-capped tooth."

Valliant tried to be nonchalant.

"I've noticed," he said. "Probably wants your autograph."

"Or something," Paul said. "He's got a bulge inside his left breast pocket about the size of yours."

"Well, as long as he keeps his right hand away from it, we haven't anything to worry about."

Paul was in no danger at all, but imagined danger would go a long way toward keeping him close to Valliant and away from the strong influences of his father. And the goon presented no danger to Valliant either, no danger that was, until March 23rd. But by that time Zarelli would have his money back and

Valliant could send the goon home with a swift kick and a *bon voyage*.

All four of them were along for the ride up the choppy, petulant North Sea and into Bremerhaven, a snug harbor docked with clean white ships ordered neatly, like handkerchiefs in a bureau drawer.

After arranging to meet at a Bremerhaven train depot, Valliant took Paul with him to a bank, left him outside and exchanged his $12,000 for Deutsche Marks, four for each American dollar. They made bulky weight in the attache case, but it was better to give the impression he was a rich tourist who was going to be around a while, instead of a suspicious looking American obviously out to make a quick killing on a chess match.

Out of Bremerhaven on the Trans-European Express, a sleek soundless passenger diesel which moved them out of the city and into the German countryside like a bullet. Paul and Valliant sat in a double seat together; Karl Shullenberg, grumbling, sat alone in the next seat ahead.

And Valliant's private goon was off in the distance, guarding the car's exit like a bulldog guarding an estate. He probably had sensed by this time that there was some connection other than a casual one between Valliant and the Shullenbergs. Valiant didn't mind. It was just one more complicated little thing to keep a small mind occupied and to perhaps confused it if Valliant's bet blew up in his face.

Saxony became North-Rhine and day became night. They were hurtling through the heart of the Ruhr. Occasional red and white dots flashed on distant hillsides as miners worked to pull coal from the earth. And then Hesse where thick forests made the night still darker, where the only change in the landscape was an intermittent castle exploding in silhoutte against the horizon.

"Mr. Valliant? Are you awake?"

"Yes," Valliant said to Paul. "What is it?"

"The man up front. The one who's been following us."

"Yes, what about him?"

"I know it isn't me he's after."

In the near darkness Valliant's body stiffened. "And how do you know that?"

"I've been trying to piece it together since the crossing," Paul said. "Ever since I found that note in the top drawer of your bureau. I wasn't snooping. I was putting clothes away and happened to get a wrong drawer. You owe a Mr. Zarelli $40,000, payable by March 23rd. And you may have robbed a bank to get money for some purpose."

"Clever boy," said Valliant. "Anything else?"

"Just that Mr. Zarelli has sent along a traveling companion and he would be the man who's been following us since London. Your stop at that bank was probably to ex-

change your dollars fo rmarks. I started putting things together."

"Like?"

"Like there isn't a business on earth that can turn you a $40,000 in four days. Except the business of gambling. You're putting your $10,000 on me to win and hope the odds jump high enough for you to make an easy killing."

"You would have made a good detective, Paul," Valliant said. "Yes, I've hit upon a pretty good little scheme and I intend to cash in on it."

"And what if I refuse to be a party to your racket? What if I refuse to play the match?"

"Paul, let me just say that it would be a tragic shame for a boy with talents and a future like yours to die at such an early age."

"You'd kill me," said Paul. "You'd be signing your own death warrant."

"Probably," said Valliant. "But remember, you'll be instantly dead. I'll still be alive and running. Not for long perhaps, but my death isn't necessarily guaranteed. Yours is as certain as this pistol strapped to my chest. I'd say you've got a choice to ponder, Paul."

Instinctively, as though he could always think better with it handy, Paul pulled out the miniature chess board and began fidgetting the pieces over the board. Each time he glanced up at Valliant, Valliant made sure his own face mirrored the threat and menace of death. He

could kill Zarelli's goon, but he couldn't kill the boy. He just hoped Paul wouldn't sense it. A minute crept by. Finally the head lifted from the board and spoke.

"The fact of your desperation is something I won't tinker with, Mr. Valliant. And I've got too much lifetime ahead of me to live. We'll play it your way."

A minor victory. But Valliant wasn't rushing to pat himself on the back or relax his guard. Paul Shullenberg wasn't the kind of boy to be satisfied with permanent defeat.

MUNICH. A city of spired cathedrals and brooding towers, a city with the history of Hitlerian violence still rank in the air. Germans. He'd had enough of them during World War II to last him a lifetime. Memories of the horror of war still made him shudder when he thought

of them. He didn't want to come that close to death twice.

They took an ancient bus van out of Munich. The weather had turned chilly. Paul and his father had put on heavy wool sweaters in a men's room in the bus depot. Zarelli had always chided Valliant for not planning for inevitabilities.

"There's your executioner, Mr. Valliant," Paul said, pointing to Valliant's private goon sitting just inside the door.

"And I'm yours. Don't forget that."

"Mr. Valliant? Quit playing the big gangster. Without me you're just a target walking around waiting for a hole."

"Kid? Play yourself a game of chess."

"I don't feel like it, thanks. Just lay off pushing me around. My father pushes, you push. My mother got pushed too, you know. So she took a walk to a hotel in the Bronx one night, got a room on the top floor and jumped out of the window. But I'm not as weak as that. When I get pushed, I push back. Just remember that, Mr. Valliant."

"Watch the scenery," Valliant said, somewhat uneasy at Paul's revelation. "Get yourself an education."

It was two hours and twenty minutes to Swaburg in the Bavarian Alps, a small village with its handful of chalets spread out on a gradual incline to the base of a moun tain of encrusted snow. Coal and iron and chess and sauerkraut, Paul said, informationally. Chasms, snowfields, fair wine; cheese pastries and Weisswurst sausage. And a man named Rhoedorf.

The village had two hostels and Paul went about his business of choosing one with singular organization. The Siebzehn Haus, he decided, after looking the two of them over. Large ground floor dining hall with plenty of room to accommodate spectators for a chess match. A fireplace with two stone side mantels cluttered with chess trophies and plaques, indicating it was here that most of the village chess was played.

Valliant read the inscribed names on the trophies and plaques with rising confidence. Year after year, trophy after trophy, the name appearing with the greatest frequency was the magical name of Henrik Rhoedorf. They registered as American tourists, Karl and Paul Shullenberg first, twenty minutes ahead of Valliant, and Valliant twenty minutes later, as a wandering American writer getting away to work on a book.

Valliant, in his room that night, listened to them argue beyond a wall. Now, actually having reached the den of the lion, Valliant's name was hardly mentioned. It was the name of Erik Rhoedorf they spoke of continually, that and how the match was to be made and executed.

Paul Shullenberg, a young boy of obsessive genius, had three obsessions now: his obsessive dislike

of Valliant and his own father; and his obsession to beat an international master of chess.

March 21st. At eleven o'clock the threesome went downstairs for lunch. The dining room was nearly empty except for two aged villagers going ponderously through a game of chess at a table near the center of the room. Paul never took his eyes off them, giving his bratwurst and his lunch partners no attention whatever.

"Not good players. Good amateurs, all right, but basic text book moves."

"And you stand as much chance of playing them as you do Rhoedorf," Karl Shullenberg said. "And that is slightly less chance than a mangoose at a convention of cobras."

Paul hurriedly wiped his lips with his napkin.

"Watch me," he said. He got up and went across the room to their table. Play stopped. Smiles and handshakes were exchanged. The two villagers exchanged quizzical glances, then nodded. One of them summoned a waiter, who listened briefly and then disappeared.

Shortly, one of the old villagers rose and took a seat at the table immediately behind. He took his same position, leaving two table-widths and two vacant chairs, back-to-back. The waiter reappeared. In his arms he carried a second chess case, which he opened and placed in the center of the second table.

"What the devil's going on?" Valliant said to Karl Shullenberg.

"A fool is rushing in," Karl Shullenberg said. "He's going to play them both simultaneously. If he loses either match, we can kiss the challenge match with Herr Rhoedorf a swift goodbye!"

In less than twenty minutes Paul was slipping back into his seat next to Valliant.

"Well?" Valliant said. "What happened?"

"I beat them both, seventeen moves each."

"You wrote something down on a slip of paper before the match started," Valliant observed, "Autographs?"

"The number of moves I would defeat each of them in," Paul said.

"Acrobatics," huffed Karl Shullenberg. "They won't be impressed."

"They were impressed enough to tell me I ought to play a match with a man named Lippe. He's suppose to be the cream of the village amateurs. I told them I thought it would be a waste of time. Then they mentioned Rhoedorf, just as I suspected."

Valliant smiled. It certainly didn't take Paul long to act once he had his mind made up.

"Good," he said. "When are you going to play him?"

"I answered that I considered Rhoedorf a fading master," Paul said. "One I would find little challenge in playing. Boy, neither of them cared for that at all!"

"And you're looking at someone else who doesn't care for it, either," Karl Shullenberg said, glaring across the table at his son. "So you think a little impudence is going to do you some good, do you? You think Rhoedorf is going to fly into a rage and play a match with you, just for the pleasure of whipping a snot-nosed kid. Well, forget it, Paul. All you will gain is total indifference. Good work. You might just as well have slapped Willie Mays in the face and then asked him if he'd like to have a game of catch with you!"

"Wait and see," Paul said.

Valliant didn't like the way Paul was considering time an unlimited resource. While he had forever to bring Rhoedorf to the chess tables, Valliant had less than three days.

"I'm afraid wait-and-see time for this reverse psychology of yours runs out tomorrow morning. If Rhoedorf doesn't come across with a challenge by then, you'll have to issue him and apology and take your chances with a formal challenge."

"He'll come across," Paul said. "All Germans are arrogant in the face of personal ridicule. When they began calling Hitler a madman he only grew madder."

"That's true," Karl Shullenberg said, sparing no venom in his tone. "I keep telling you you're a fool. And you only become more foolish."

Valliant reserved his judgment on Paul's foolishness. But when the afternoon went by and early evening, his confidence in the boy began to wane.

"Only one thing to do now," Paul said, at seven in the Shullenberg's room. "Play this village genius, this Lippe."

"On short notice? Tonight?" Karl Shullenberg swore beneath his breath. "Fat chance."

"I'm going downstairs to the manager of the hostel," said Paul quickly, "and see if I can get the word of challenge relayed."

"Save your trip," Karl Shullenberg said. "You've already botched any chance you ever had to play Herr Rhoedorf." His seething words went unheeded and unheard; Paul was already out the door and gone.

They could only wait now, Valliant hoping Paul could turn some miracle. But when ten minutes had passed, and then twenty, and then thirty, the liklihood of that seemed as improbable as seeing bathing beauties in the Swiss Alps.

When forty-five minutes had gone by, Valliant became concerned about Paul's whereabouts. He went downstairs alone and asked a gray-headed desk clerk hunched over a newspaper if Paul had made any inquiries. The clerk raised a gnarled hand and gestured around the corner and into the dining room.

When Valliant followed in the direction the finger had pointed he was surprised and amazed to find a good-sized crowd jammed in around a table near the back of the room.

A quick head count put the number at twenty-five. When Valliant moved in toward the rear of the circle, whispered comments flying from spectator to spectator sent his hopes for the match with Rhoedorf soaring.

"Poor Lippe. His pieces are pitifully protected."

"Lippe has smoked nine cigarettes in the last ten minutes. He has never smoked that many in a single day."

"Well, he has every reason to be nervous. Fourteen years old, the boy is, and such cool grace under pressure, such elan! Herr Rhoedorf won't be able to ignore this kind of victory."

"He has challenged Herr Rhoedorf? What a matching! If he accepts they'll come here from miles around! They'd even buy tickets!"

Suddenly there was a heavy gasp, twenty pairs of lungs exhaling as one, as though death had entered the room.

"The boy has checkmated Herr Lippe. What a division of defenses!"

"It is brutal. Swift and brutal. Like shearing off an ox's head."

The crowd closed in on Paul Shullenberg, shaking his hand, patting him on the back. Lippe remained in his seat, his head bowed over the chess board, stunned at his quick defeat.

Questions flew into the air like handsful of confetti. Where was he from? Who taught him how to play? Would he be staying in Swaburg

long? Valliant inched forward, listening. There was just one question he wanted to hear. Just one.

"Is it true that you will not play Herr Rhoedorf because you consider him a fading master not worth the time?"

"There isn't time, no," said Paul slyly. "My father and I are returning to the United States in three days. That is when our ship sails from Bremerhaven. And you know about ships. They have a habit of not waiting for anyone."

"But if Herr Rhoedorf were to consent to play you tomorrow night," suggested another voice. "Here at the Siebzehn Haus. Would you consent to that?"

"I might," Paul hedged. "The night after would be the best."

Valliant could only watch with admiration and hope plastered all over his face. Paul had them eating

from his hand and although they probably would not bet on him when the time came, they would put just the proper amount of pressure on Rhoedorf to play the match. The will of the public; Paul was bending it to his own desires now. It was beautiful deceit. And frightening.

At ten o'clock the next morning a Herr Richter called at the Shullenberg's room. He was mildly surprised to see Valliant there, until his mind caught the obvious connection.

"Ah, yes," Richter said, "the American writer staying down the hall. Well, it seems you've coincidentally happened on quite a story."

"It's worth some looking into, yes," Valliant said. "David and Goliath. The gnat and the elephant."

"Well, the Munich papers already know. One of the villagers made a telephone call last night, after Herr Rhoedorf agreed to the match. By tonight, Swaburg will be like your Times Square on New Year's Eve."

Paul, sitting placidly on the edge of the bed, rose and smiled politely. "You may inform Herr Rhoedorf that I will be honored to play him. Has he named a time and agreed to the Siebzehn Haus as the site for the match?"

"Eight o'clock tomorrow evening, here at the Siebzehn Haus, yes," said Richter. "The reporters will be mad when they learn Mr. Valliant has the inside track to this story. Coming all this way just for a name, a place of birth and a few photographs. Very mad. Well, Mr. Shullenberg, tomorrow night at eight o'clock?"

"Tomorrow night at eight o'clock," Paul said.

Valliant saved his displeasure until Herr Richter had left.

"What in the devil are you doing pushing it back to tomorrow night?" Valliant fired at Paul Shullenberg. "That's the 23rd and I'm not going to have any breathing room if this thing falls through!"

The boy's smile showed comfort. "Mr. Valliant, relax. Nothing's going to fall through. You want a lot of betting, don't you? You want to give the crowds time to get here, don't you? You want to be able to lose yourself in them when it comes time to make your bets, don't you. Well—don't you?"

As always, Paul Shullenberg's command of the situation, his cool, logic was surprisingly right on target. Once more, Valliant was reminded of the timid, inward, defensive young boy he had first met on the ship. But it was only a memory; that Paul Shullenberg was dead.

Foreign automobiles trickled into Swaburg all afternoon long, filling streets that had once been nearly deserted. Were it not for the fact that a snowstorm was expected to hit the region by nightfall, the procession would not have stopped. The headlines in sports sections of

the Munich paper had caught the fancy of hundreds of German chess followers: RHOEDORF TO PLAY PUBLIC MATCH WITH FOURTEEN YEAR OLD AMERICAN. UNHERALDED AMERICAN YOUTH TO PLAY GERMAN CHESS CHAMPION. They were on their way, thought Valliant. And so was their money.

The morning of the match the threesome had a late breakfast of scrambled eggs and German sausages in their room. As they ate there was a knock at their door. Valliant opened it on the hostel's sparse little manager, who clicked his heels and presented a familiar windowed envelope.

"Telegram for Mr. Valliant, the American writer," he announced crisply, in broken English. "It is probably from your publisher, yes? You Americans. Always working so fast, always making the money."

"We call it striking while the iron is hot," Valliant told him.

He gave the manager a tip of a dollar in the name of capitalism. For the first time in many weeks, Valliant felt able to afford it. Without a glance at the bottom of the message, Valliant knew who it would be from.

TODAY IS THE DAY, VALLIANT. STOP. HOPE BY MIDNIGHT EVERYTHING IS RESOLVED IN YOUR FAVOR. LUCK. VINCE ZARELLI.

By two o'clock the snow had ceased its falling and the skies opened up a pale blue. Karl Shullenberg, reduced to nothing more than a father along for the ride, dozed fitfully on the bed. Paul Shullenberg read from a book on linear programming while he scraped peanut butter from a jar with a kitchen knife and spread it on slices of German rye bread. Valliant strapped on the pistol and jammed bundles of marks, 4,000 to a bundle, into the pockets of his jacket, while he watched the crowds milling below in snowpacked streets.

"Must be at least a thousand people down there," he remarked. "This will be like taking candy from a bunch of babies."

"You don't really care that you're bilking these people, do you?" Paul said, spreading another slice of bread.

"Why should I? That's what this world is all about. Do it to somebody else before he gets the chance to do it to you."

"They're losing their money."

"They'll make more," Valliant said. "I stand to lose my life. And I've got only one of those. I'm going out and place some bets. Just make sure you're here when I get back."

If there was one thing Valliant could do well it was spotting a bookmaker. The shifting eyes, the scurrying way they moved through a crowd in a bar, the indiscreet way they had of lingering just out of traffic on street corners and at race tracks and at the entrances to football stadiums. And the little black book, always the little book.

Valliant knew that there would be a ceiling on odds, probably 7-1, or 8-1. And he knew the suspicion he would draw by placing the entire $10,000 with one bookmaker, just as he knew the difficulties he would have collecting from too many bookies if he won. When he won.

He found one bookie at the bar in the second of Swaburg's hostels, The Kurhaus.

"You Americans," he said to Valliant with contempt, dark beer dripping from his lower lip. "The height of status with you is how much money you can spend, never mind what you spend it on."

"Never mind the lecture," said Valliant. "What kind of odds you giving on the American kid?"

"Five-to-one. That's the best I can do."

"Forget it, then. I'll go someplace else."

The German eyes widened at that remark, at the thought of losing a sucker. It was exactly the look Valliant had expected.

"Six-to-one, but no higher."

"Eight-to-one," said Valliant, "and the kid will win every game in at least thirty moves."

"You Americans. You think no one has a chance to win at anything but you. How much do you want to bet?"

"$3,000," Valliant said. "In marks.

The German bookmaker thought the proposition over through a long gulp of beer. "You are just lucky very few others have as much confidence in the boy as you do. Yes, I'll take your bet. We bookmakers can pay off on miracles as well as on anything else."

By three o'clock Valliant had placed two more bets, one for another $3,000 and another for $4,000. The crowds had been good to do business in and his identity as the American writer who knew more about Paul Shullenberg than anyone else in Swaburg had been kept a secret.

A secret from everyone, that was, except the bulky goon in the white silk tie, stick-pin and perpetual sneer. He caught up with Valliant as Valliant was re-entering the Siebzehn Haus. A pair of silver, opaque-lens sunglasses had been added to his wardrobe. And a name to his sinister face.

"The name is Manny Oakland," introduced the dull voice. It was a voice Valliant had heard a hundred times, from a hundred different mouths. Emotionless, cold, mechanical. The grip in Valliant's hand was mildly painful. "I got the name from the time I made hits on three guys there in a twenty-four hour stretch."

Valliant nodded in acknowledgement of the feat.

"No need to play secret agent about why I'm here, Valliant," Oakland said. "Mr. Zarelli sent me, which you probably knew from the first time you spotted me on the ship. He sent me to collect the

$40,000 by midnight, or see you don't come back to New York in any position but lying down and cold dead."

"I'm properly scared, Oakland. Anything else?"

"Just that it looks like you might come out of this little jam all right," Manny Oakland said. "On the ship I put two-and-two together about you getting chummy with the old guy and the kid, had Mr. Zarelli check up on them. Kid's a genius chess player nobody knows about and you bet a bundle on him, that loot you took out of the Savings and Loan in Queens."

"Looks favorable," Valliant said.

"And Mr. Zarelli says you begin to look favorable, too," Oakland told Valliant. "Says you got a corner of your head that's holding brains he didn't think you had. Wants to have a little talk with you when you get back. Maybe fit you back into the organization where things are more challenging."

"Tell him I'll think it over, Oakland."

"See you at eight o'clock, Valliant. For the big kill. One way or the other."

Burt Valliant's confidence was flying high as he went back up to the Shullenberg room, but when he opened the door and walked in the confidence took a nose dive and slammed to earth. The room like as though it had been visited by a tornado. Chairs lay over-turned. An end table reclined in a corner, one leg missing. A procelain water pitcher was nothing but a pile of jagged squares at the base of a wall.

Karl Shullenberg stood off in a neutral corner of the room. His hair was tossed about on his head and he was bleeding from a small cut on his forehead. Paul Shullenberg was poised in an opposite corner, his nose bloodied, the dismembered table leg raised high in his right fist to defend himself.

"What the hell's going on here!" Valliant tore the table leg out of Paul Shullenberg's hand, ordered the father to take a seat on the bed. "If you want to kill each other, let me do it! I guarantee a real job! Now what the devil is this all about?"

"A slight disagreement," huffed Karl Shullenberg. He was clearly out of shape, his thin chest heaving heavily. It looked to Valliant as though he had barely salvaged a draw.

"A disagreement? Over what?"

"My father seems to think he knows more about chess than all the world's masters put together," Paul snapped. "He seems to think demands and ultimatims will drop the whole world to its knees. Well, he found out differently."

Suddenly Karl Shullenberg's temper snapped like a tree limb bent too far. "There will be no quick victories No racing pellmell down the board like some mindless maniac! You will employ an ordered

attack and a deliberate grouping of pieces, or you will lose!"

"Everything is under control, Mr. Valliant," Paul said calmly. "My father doesn't seem to care for my king assault, but what he cares for doesn't matter. My strategy is all arranged. My way."

Valliant pulled back his jacket to expose the pistol and placed his hands on his hips.

"All right," he said, "listen. This is the way it's going to be. Paul's going to play the match the way he wants, because he knows more about this than both of us put together. As for you, Pop, you're just along for the exercise now. Just another guy sitting in a ringside seat."

"He is still a minor" snapped Karl Shullenberg. "And if I decide he does not play, then he does not play!"

"Wrong, Pop," said Valliant. "I make all the decisions now, and I've made all I'm going to make."

In the face of all this anomosity, Valliant now had an idea to put it down once and for all. He tore a bedsheet into strips and then ordered Karl Shullenberg to get down on the floor on his stomach. When he was through, he had the senior Shullenberg bound and gagged to last fifty years.

"And that's the way you stay for the rest of the evening," Valliant said.

Valliant could bet the voice struggling to speak through wads and strips of bedsheet was mouthing every obscenity in the book.

Now all the problems were solved. Valliant had Karl Shullenberg right where he wanted him and he had Paul's total cooperation. He had a sure bet going and the promise of a meeting with Vince Zarelli to discuss his future. It was like sliding down the rainbow to the pot of gold.

Valliant brought dinner up to the room at six o'clock, giving him a chance to see how the lobby and dining room of the Siebzehn Haus were filling. He wasn't disappointed. The crowds were so thick and festive, he had a feeling he'd taken a wrong turn and ended up at the biggest cocktail party ever thrown. Well-dressed Germans, American tourists, villagers, jabbering, lifting steins of beer, devouring sandwiches, making last-minute bets with the bookies or among themselves.

Coming out of the dining room with sacks of sausages and containers of salad an obvious reporter-type and a sidekick wielding a camera zeroed in on Valliant like two vultures heading to feast off a fallen animal.

"You're the American writer," said the reporter. "My name is Hinztburger. How are our chances for an interview with the boy?"

"They're terrible," said Valliant. "Please excuse me."

"A few photographs, then."

"You can have all the pictures

you want after the boy beats Rhoedorf."

"Your property. Is that it?"

"Exclusively," Valliant told the reporter.

"Tell us. They say he plays chess constantly, night and day. Is that true, Mr. Valliant?"

Valliant, pushing his way onward, lifted the paper sacks. "Not constantly. Once in a great while he eats."

The two hours until the match passed slowly. Valliant smoked a complete pack of cigaretes and ate nothing. Paul Shullenberg seemed more edgy still, only picking at his salad and sausage as he nervously fooled with his miniature chess board. Soon he began pacing the room, his face a dark cloud, pausing occasionally to look down at his father, helplessly bound and gagged on the floor. Each time the father's old eyes grew wide with fear, speaking a thousand fearful thoughts muffled by his gag.

Ten minutes to eight o'clock. Valliant rose from his reclining position on the bed and put on his jacket.

"Ten minutes, kid. Better wash up and put on a fresh shirt."

Paul began pouring fresh water from a new pitcher into a basin.

"I'm going down alone," he said tersely.

"What do you mean, alone?"

"You play no official part in this," Paul said. " I won't be shepparded in like some club prize fighter with his manager. You'll go down ahead of me, Mr. Valliant and allow me the dignity of a solo appearance."

"You try anything foolish at this late date and you're dead," Valliant reminded.

"No, I'm going completely through with my plan."

Valliant went to the door where he turned and pointed his finger. "Two minutes early. We don't want to risk a default. Check your wrist watch."

"Nine minutes to eight," Paul said.

"Seven minutes," Paul repeated. "I'll be on time."

The crowd awaiting the match in the Siebzehn Haus had doubled in two short hours. Valliant made his way through the lobby while a harried desk clerk took last minute wagers, calling them out to an assistant who feverishly flew a pencil over a note pad.

"Ten marks on Rhoedorf for Herr Mahler. Yes I have it. Yes, Herr Raeder! What? Five marks on Rhoedorf! The American gentleman is next. How much? Fifty marks on Rhoedorf! All right. Who's next? Who's next?"

Valliant pushed his way into the dining room, where he found a standing crowd ten deep completely encircling a solitary chess table and two chairs. One of the chairs was already occupied by the mountainous body of Henrik Rhoedorf. Valliant was stunned by his obvious

age and the rugged sturdiness belying it.

He seemed under no duress, though occasionally a thick hand would reach up and make a run through a full head of shaggy white hair. People crowded around him chatting, offering encouragement, though he showed that he didn't seem to need any. Valliant was thoroughly impressed, but not disappointed. He was prepared. But not perpared to meet the likes of Paul Shullenberg.

Everything was ready. Two time clocks set in teakwood boxes. Judges, officials. The board already lined with the weapons of this strange battle, where men killed each other in their minds. The only missing element was Paul Shullenberg.

They waited for the opponent. Across the gulf, between the crowd shifting in front of him, Valliant picked out Manny Oakland's psychotic smile, Vince Zarelli's emissary of death and reprieve. He still wore the sunglasses with the opaque lens. Their eyes met and Oakland nodded. This was it then; Burt Valliant's breathless minute in time when all he owned including his life was on the line.

Then, a scattering of applause broke out. Paul Shullenberg had appeared in the doorway of the dining room. Valliant checked his watch. 7:58. The kid's timing was perfect.

The crowd parted to let the boy through. Awed whispering broke out about his size, his courage, his demeanor.

"Look at the face. Ice or stone. There doesn't seem to be a nerve in it."

"But he's a killer. He turned Herr Lippe into a quivering coward. Don't be misled by his look."

"Rhoedorf will know how to handle him, and I'll make some money in the bargain."

"It's a shame his ego has got in the way of his reason."

"Look at the eyes. There's no cruelty there. Why, they look like eyes ready to fall asleep!"

And then Paul Shullenberg was making his way past Valliant. And smiling. Looking him straight in the eye and smiling. It was at that instant Valliant felt something was

going on, going wrong. Something he didn't yet know about.

Paul Shullenberg shook hands casually with officials and then with Henrik Rhoedorf himself and Valliant sensed this was not the same Paul Shullenberg he had left upstairs, had plotted and planned with these three days. His face held an odd tranquility, an indolence which Valliant found oddly disturbing.

Abruptly the match commenced, playing under a one-minute limit per move.

"Shullenberg—Pawn to Queen 4!" an official announced to the crowd, as another recorded Paul's opening move on his side of a large blackboard. Valliant knew nothing about chess, but he gathered from the whispers flying around him that it was not the customary move of a genius offensive player.

Henrik Rhoedorf made his counter move swiftly and with little hesitation, a like pawn move.

Again Paul Shullenberg took a full minute to make up his mind.

"Shullenberg—knight to king 2."

A condescending voice next to Valliant said, "That wasn't the move of a genius. He's block the development of his king bishop!"

"Well, we've put our money on the right player, all right. That boy doesn't deserve to be in the same room with Herr Rhoedorf!"

A cold sweat suddenly came up on Valliant's forehead. His spine bristled up to the nape of his neck. Across the room Manny Oakland adjusted his sun glasses anxiously, keeping Valliant in sight.

Then commotion broke out in the hotel's lobby. Shouting and gesturing. A policeman tried to calm a woman, a lodger, who probably had come down from an upper floor. She wore hair curlers under a hair net.

Instinctively, the chess match stopped. Valliant touched for the pistol against his chest, as the black news swept the room like an ugly typhoon.

"Upstairs. They found him upstairs."

"I didn't know the boy's father had come along."

"How else could a minor get to Germany? Of course his father is along."

"They've ruled out robbery. The father's wallet was still in his pocket. But he was bound and gagged, so they were after something and wanted a silent getaway."

Valliant swallowed a sickening lump and looked for an exit. He saw an exit door at the far end of the room, away from the direction of the lobby. He began moving toward it, pressing against spectators, sliding between bodies, as the talk continued in his ears.

"They say the father was stabbed so many times, you couldn't count without counting some of them twice. With a kitchen knife. A common kitchen knife. Blood everywhere."

"Well, they'd better let the match continue without telling the boy. He's got enough to worry about, with Rhoedorf tearing into him the way he is!"

Now, in an abrupt, sickening flash, Valliant understood. Paul Shullenberg would not need to be notified of his father's death. *The king attack from the rear! The wish for his father's death needed acting out on a chess board no longer!* Paul Shullenberg had his revenge on two counts!

But Valliant could not long mourn the dead; he had a life of his own to save. Between spectators he caught the grimly set face of Manny Oakland as he shifted through the crowd in reaction to Valliant's departure.

He would reach the exit door a good deal before Manny Oakland. And he told himself he stood a damned good chance of getting Oakland before the triggerman got to him.

But beyond that exit door lay a cold and strange Germany, a Germany into which Vince Zarelli would send an endless stream of emissaries.

Valliant checked for the pistol again to make sure it was there. *A loser again and running,* he said to himself, hope draining out of him. *And running.* Until the inevitable end.

Read: In the SEPTEMBER issue:

TRIPLE CROSS AT HOLY CROSS

The New MIKE SHAYNE *Short Novel*

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The next issue of this magazine will feature one of Brett Halliday's most exciting Mike Shayne novels. In it the redhead finds himself trapped in a ship of doom, sailing an uncharted course toward certain destruction, with an unknown traitor aboard who has sentenced them to death. Don't miss this engrossing short novel. Reserve your copy now. hear?

Above us, a Death hurled out of the sky. Inside, where we huddled helplessly, a killer and his paramour waited, waited for the storm to stop, so that one of them could go free—while the other perished . . .

TWISTER!

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

EVERY SPRING tornados, a half-dozen or so, swept across our part of East Texas, some small and little more dangerous than whirlwinds, others dealing out indiscriminate death and destruction.

In those days, the Thirties, there

wasn't a great deal of excitement around, and the twisters were the subject of much conversation, the tales growing more exaggerated as they passed from mouth to mouth.

Tales of straws driven like spikes through telephone poles, roofs blown from houses and beds plucked out, their occupants carried miles without being harmed in the least, whole houses picked up and transported great distances and set down intact.

One story I remember vividly. A woman, hearing the approach of a twister and having no storm cellar, ran to a nearby pond with her baby. The pond was shallow, only shoulder-deep, and the twister dipped down and neatly decapitated the woman but left the baby unharmed.

I never saw any of this first hand, of course. The closest I'd been to a twister was watching small ones, black, furiously spinning funnels, twisting and dipping along the river bottom a mile from Sheriff Jason Little's place, where I lived with him and Aunt Beth.

It wasn't unusual in the spring for Sheriff Jason to roust us out in the middle of the night and hustle us down into the storm cellar a few yards back of the house. Most cellars were located a distance away, instead of under the house, the theory being that a twister could collapse a house and trap those in the cellar underneath.

I hated those trips. I didn't like being wakened in the middle of the night, but most of all I didn't like the cellar. It was full of cobwebs and spiders, and the logs used to brace the earthern top were a choice hiding place for snakes, some harmless, some not. Once or twice a year we discovered a rattler in the cellar. I had a horror of snakes, any snake.

I swore to myself that when I was grown up and moved away, I'd never run to a storm cellar. I'd rather take my chances with the tornados.

"You do that, Kyle," Sheriff Jason said. "When you're grown up. Right now you're sixteen, and you'll do as I say."

Sheriff Jason and Aunt Beth were brother and sister, not man and wife, Sheriff Jason's wife had died some years back, and Aunt Beth kept house for him. They weren't my aunt and uncle; they had taken me to raise when my own Aunt Aggie died. Sheriff Jason wasn't even a sheriff, only a deputy. Yet the same purpose was served. He was the only law in our little town.

I had been living with them for three years, enduring I don't know how many spring cellar trips, when Sheriff Jason woke me at four one morning.

"Kyle, we'd better get down to the storm cellar," he said, shaking me. "The wind's coming up and the clouds are green as bile. Could be a twister heading our way."

"I'm too sleepy," I grumbled.

"I'm sleepy, too. On your feet, boy!"

Sheriff Jason didn't look like a slave driver. He looked more like a plump-cheeked, bald Santa Claus, a stubby black pipe stuck in his mouth instead of the traditional black beard.

I put on pants, shirt and shoes and followed Sheriff Jason down the stairs.

Aunt Beth was waiting in the kitchen with a coal oil lantern. She had on a robe with a rain slicker thrown over it, and she was half asleep, propped up against the kitchen cabinet. Sheriff Jason took the lantern from her and led the way out back.

The wind was coming up. It was so strong it tore the cellar door from Sheriff Jason's grip, banging it flat against the ground. He gave me the lantern, and I helped Aunt Beth down the wooden steps, shuddering as a cobweb brushed across my face. Behind me, I heard Sheriff Jason slam the door shut and slide the iron bar across it. Hail struck the door like a charge of buckshot.

The cellar had the damp, musty smell of a tomb. I heard a slithering sound in the logs above my head. Mice. Or a snake.

Both sides of the cellar were lined with wooden shelves holding row on row of fruit jars, some empty, others filled with fruit and vegetables Aunt Beth had canned last summer and fall.

There were two rocking chairs. I left them for Sheriff Jason and Aunt Beth, and I sat down with my back against an old trunk.

Sheriff Jason took out his black pipe and began filling it with Prince Albert smoking tobacco. "Might as well get comfortable. We may be here a spell."

Aunt Beth was already dozing in her rocker. I was sleepy, too. I let my head droop, nostrils filling with the comforting aroma of Sheriff Jason's tobacco.

I guess I must have dozed, for the next thing I knew someone was hammering on the cellar door. A man's voice said, "Let us in! I know someone's down there, I can see a light!"

Sheriff Jason batted a hand at me as I started up, got to his feet and went up the steps. He heaved the door partly open, letting in blowing rain, and two people ducked past him and came down the steps. A man and a woman.

The man was skinny, slight, sandy-haired, around thirty. There was something about him that bothered me, something out of character, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. The woman was five years or so younger, with long black hair and enormous black eyes. She was quite pretty, but I got the impression she was frightened to death. I supposed it was fear of the twister.

Sheriff Jason finished barring the door and came back.

"Car ran out of gas up the road

a piece," the man said in a high voice. "Sure looks like cyclone weather out there and I was afraid we—I'm Roy Carter. This here is Mary Louise Ralston."

"Jason Little," Sheriff Jason said, his eyes on the girl. "Thought I knew you. Gil Ralston's daughter, ain't you, girl? From over near the county seat?"

The girl nodded, swallowing.

Roy Carter said nervously, "You're Sheriff Jason Little?"

Sheriff Jason switched his gaze. "That's right, Roy."

He held out his hand and Roy Carter, after what I thought was a slight hesitation, took it. Then it came to me what was so odd about him. He was pale, almost sickly white, as though he'd never been out in the sun. That was unusual for our part of the country, unless you were city folk visiting, and yet he was wearing country clothes, khaki pants, denim shirt, high-heeled boots and a leather jacket.

Roy and Mary Louise sat down close together on the trunk, Sheriff Jason returning to the rocker, his gaze never leaving Roy. If Aunt Beth had awakened at any time, she was back sound asleep now. Mary Louise shivered as a gust of wind rattled the cellar door and huddled closer to Roy, who put his arm around her shoulders and whispered something in her ear.

"Roy Carter." Sheriff Jason was frowning. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

Roy darted a quick look at him. "I don't think so, Mr. Little. I've hardly been around at all."

"Jason, son. Sheriff Jason, everybody calls me." I thought he placed undue emphasis on the "sheriff." He went on, his voice slowing to a drawl. "Reckon you'll have to overlook an old man's nosiness, Roy. But it does seem funny you out with Mary Louise, you being a stranger and all. Folks hereabouts are usually more strict with their daughters."

Mary Louise tossed her head. "I'm twenty-two, Sheriff."

"That may well be, but you're still living to home, ain't you?"

"Mary Louise and me, we're going off to be married." Roy tightened his left arm around her. His right hand was under the jacket, as though to keep it warm. "We met some time back and we've been —writing to each other since."

"There's something—" Sheriff Jason clapped a hand to his ear, as though to clear his head. Then he slapped his knee. "Of course! Your mother! No, your stepmother. She was killed two, three years back, wasn't she, Mary Louise? There was quite a to-do about it as I recollect."

"Yes, my stepmother was killed." Eyes downcast, Mary Louise smoothed her dress down over her knees.

"Murdered, that's what it was: They arrested the hired hand for it, some fellow named Walt. He

was tried and convicted for it, sent to Huntsville to die. But he got loose on the way there. They hunted him for nigh on two years, finally caught him and he's been waiting for the new execution date to roll around. You get loose again, Walt? Walt—Uh, yeah, Walt Saddler. Right?"

The man took his hand from under the jacket. It held a gun, pointed right at Sheriff Jason.

"That's right, Sheriff," he said with a sigh. "My usual rotten luck. I run out of gas in front of Sheriff Jason's house with a cyclone coming on."

"Let's see now if I can recollect how it went," Sheriff Jason said, as though completely unaware of the gun.

He crossed his hands over his small pot belly and pushed his lips in and out as he talked. "Norma Ralston was found with her head bashed in with an axe. It was even wrote up in some of the newspapers as being like the Lizzie Borden case. Mrs. Ralston was a pretty woman, some younger than Gil, and it was made out in court that she was stuck on you, Walt.

"On the stand Gil testified she was flighty and he'd made a mistake marrying her, her being so much younger and all. He had suspicioned for some time that there was something going on between you two. She'd played around with other men before but always ended up sticking with Gil. It was the prosecution's case that you wanted her to run away with you, Walt. When she wouldn't go, you killed her. Am I telling it the way it was, Walt?"

"Not quite, Sheriff," Walt said grimly. "I wouldn't have anything to do with her. I was in love with Mary Louise, not Norma Ralston, and I told her so."

"She was no good, my stepmother!" The words were torn from Mary Louise like a cry of pain. "She made Daddy's life miserable!"

"You ask me, I think Gil Ralston killed his wife. He got sick and tired of her playing around and—"

"No, that's not so, Walt!" Mary Louise cried.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, to be

saying that about your daddy." Walt tightened his arm around her. "But somebody killed her and I sure didn't."

"The jury said you did, Walt," Sheriff Jason said gently.

"The jury was wrong! Juries have been wrong before!"

"That's true, it's been known to happen. 'Course, most guilty people fall back on that."

Silence fell. Aunt Beth was still sound asleep. Mary Louise was weeping silently, huge tears running down her cheeks. Walt was trying to comfort her as best he could without taking his gaze from Sheriff Jason. Sheriff Jason, hands still crossed over his belly, contemplated the pair through half-closed eyes.

"Mr. Saddler," I said tentatively. "I remember reading about you. They said you ran with Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker and Pretty Boy Floyd and some of the others."

He darted a glance at me. "You meet all kinds when you're running from the law, kid."

"Well, did you? Meet Clyde Barrow and Pretty Boy?"

"I wasn't with them but I met them, yes. They were punks, kid. Clyde Barrow was a vicious, kill-crazy punk, his woman the same. And Pretty Boy died as he had lived, rooting like a hog in a cornfield. Don't make heroes out of punks like that"

"I gather you didn't think much of them then?" Sheriff Jason drawled.

"That's what I just said, wasn't it?"

"So you did." Sheriff Jason nodded amiably. "Mary Louise, I reckon you don't think Walt here killed your stepmother?"

Mary Louise looked up with a start. "Of course not!"

"Then who? You said your daddy didn't."

"Why, I don't—" She moved closer to Walt. "I guess I didn't think too much about it."

"Didn't think about it? A woman killed in your own home, your stepmother at that, and you never thought too much about it? 'Course —" His lips pushed in and out. "You did say she made things rough for your daddy. Reckon you didn't like her much."

"I hated her!" Mary Louise said violently.

"Enough to kill her?" All of a sudden Sheriff Jason was leaning forward, voice snapping like a gunshot. "Did you hate her that much, Mary Louise?"

"What do you mean?" Mary Louise went white as flour and started up.

"What are you trying to say, Sheriff?" Walt demanded.

"It figures," Sheriff Jason said calmly. "Somebody had to kill her. You say you didn't, Walt, and I believe you. Mary Louise says her daddy didn't. And since his wife had been stepping out on him before and he hadn't done anything

about it, why just then? Why should he care about you? And if Gil had been going to kill anyone, it would have been you, not his wife. So, who's left? Mary Louise."

"What kind of proof is that? Just because she was the only one left. It could have been—"

"Someone else? A stranger dropping by? No, Walt, I'm sure you don't believe that, not if you stop and think. Mary Louise," Sheriff Jason said gently, "what did she do? Poke fun at you? Say Walt belonged to her?"

Mary Louise had her eyes closed, fists clenched together in her lap. She rocked from side to side.

"Mary Louise?" Sheriff Jason prompted.

"Yes!" Her eyes flew open, and the word burst from her explosively. "Yes, I killed her! She said Walt loved her, not a child like me! She said they were running away together. She laughed in that way of hers and told me the things they'd done together, awful, nasty things!" The words were pouring from her in a flood now.

"Mary Louise!" Walt drew back from her. "And you let me—"

"Walt, I tried to tell. I wanted to tell. But I couldn't, I just couldn't!" She clutched at him. "You don't know what it's been like, these past two years. I wanted to tell you, tell somebody, tell anybody. I wouldn't have let them kill you, I swear I wouldn't have! I would have told them before I'd've let that happen!"

"But why, Mary Louise? Nothing happened with us, none of those things happened. I didn't love her, I never did."

"But I belived her. Then. The dirty way she told me." A sob shook her like a seizure. "I just went wild, out of my head."

She reached for him again, and he jumped up, knocking her hand away, completely forgetting Sheriff Jason. "But you—*You* killed her!"

Her face worked. "I'm sorry, Walt. Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive? How can I?"

Suddenly he fell silent, and all heads turned, listening, as a roar like that of a freight train bearing down on us drowned out everything else.

The twister!

The roar grew and grew until it seemed directly overhead. Over and under the roar of the twister could be heard ripping and splintering sounds. Something heavy thudded on top of the cellar. Dirt clods fell, dust sifted down.

Then the freight-train roar lessened, receding into the distance. It grew quiet and still.

The silence held for a moment before it was torn by a shrill, climbing scream. I whirled and looked at Mary Louise.

She was in the grip of hysteria, screaming and flailing away with both hands at something in her lap.

Walt was the first to recover.

He stepped to her and, without the least hesitation, reached down and plucked the rattler from her lap. He had it by the tail. The rattler tried to curl back on itself and sink its fangs into Walt's hands. Walt spun around, snapping the snake like a whip, and the head was smashed into a pulp against a fruit jar. The jar shattered, spewing tomato juice liked spilled blood.

Walt tossed the dead rattler into a corner and hurried to Mary Louise, who was weeping softly.

"Did he strike you?"

Head down, hair like a veil across her eyes, Mary Louise didn't seem to hear him.

Walt tangled his fingers in her hair and jerked her head up. He snarled, "Damn it, did he strike you?"

Mutely she held up her arm, and I saw the puncture marks the fangs had made on the underside of her arm. The arm was already beginning to swell.

Walt dropped to one knee before her, again without hesitation, whipping a knife from his pocket. He opened it and made two quick, shallow cuts in the form of an X across the snake bite. He placed his mouth over the wound, sucked at the poison, then turned his head aside and spat.

Aunt Beth, aroused by the twister's passing, hovered near them, clucking ineffectually. Sheriff Jason, after one quick look at Mary Louise's arm, had hurried up the steps and was struggling with the cellar door. I stood helplessly beside Walt, watching.

Mary Louise whimpered. "It hurts."

Walt didn't pause in what he was doing. He had established a rhythm now. Mouth to the wound, turning aside to spit, then back again.

"Walt, I'm sorry. It was an awful thing I did to you. I don't blame you for not—" Her voice rose. "Walt, am I going to die?"

He raised his head to snarl, "No, you're not going to die!"

"Walt, I—" Her head drooped, and she slumped down. She had fainted.

I felt cold air on the back of my neck and turned as Sheriff Jason came down the steps. The cellar door was open.

"The twister's passed, Walt. You'd better see about a doctor for Mary Louise."

Walt nodded. He stood and scooped Mary Louise up in his arms. She was almost as big as he was, yet he held her easily, cradling her in his arms as gently as he would a baby.

"Kyle, you run on into the house and see if you can ring Dr. Stroud."

I ran on ahead. I stopped for a moment at the top of the steps for a quick look around. The house was still standing, untouched as far as I could see. But the big oak that had stood for over fifty years in the front yard was gone, no sign

of it anywhere, only a gaping hole where the roots had been.

And the barn was gone, too, the ground where it had once stood swept clean. Since Sheriff Jason hadn't farmed in several years, the barn had stood empty for some time, not even livestock in it.

Then I remember Sheriff Jason's Model A, which he always parked under the oak. It wasn't to be seen. I swiveled my neck and there it was, standing on its nose on top of the hump of dirt that was the cellar top. The radiator was buried out of sight. The elevated rear wheels were still spinning.

We had been lucky the top hadn't caved in on us.

"Kyle!"

I jumped at the sound of Sheriff Jason's voice and hurried on into the house. The telephone was dead. No matter how hard I cranked, I couldn't get a sound out of it.

I raced back outside, meeting them halfway to the house. "The telephone's not working. The twister must have blown down the lines."

Walt, still carrying Mary Louise, stopped and looked inquiringly at Sheriff Jason.

Sheriff Jason glanced ruefully at the upended Model A. "The Ford's no good to us, that's for sure, and I don't even have a horse and wagon. Walt, the Doc's place is about a mile up the road. Think you can carry her that far?"

Walt Saddler stared down at Mary Louise, his face both tender and sad. "I know I can if I have to," he said.

"Then head out, boy. I'll be along."

Walt started toward the gravel road running into town. He walked with his shoulders back, head up. For the first time I noticed it was daylight.

Beside me, Sheriff Jason sighed heavily. He stuck the pipe into his mouth without lighting it. Aunt Beth had already disappeared into the house, and now I saw a light go on in her upstairs bedroom.

I said, "Will they execute her?"

"We don't execute women in Texas," Sheriff Jason said irritably. He jammed the pipe into his pocket. "Why don't you go upstairs to bed? Recollect how sleepy you were when I routed you out?"

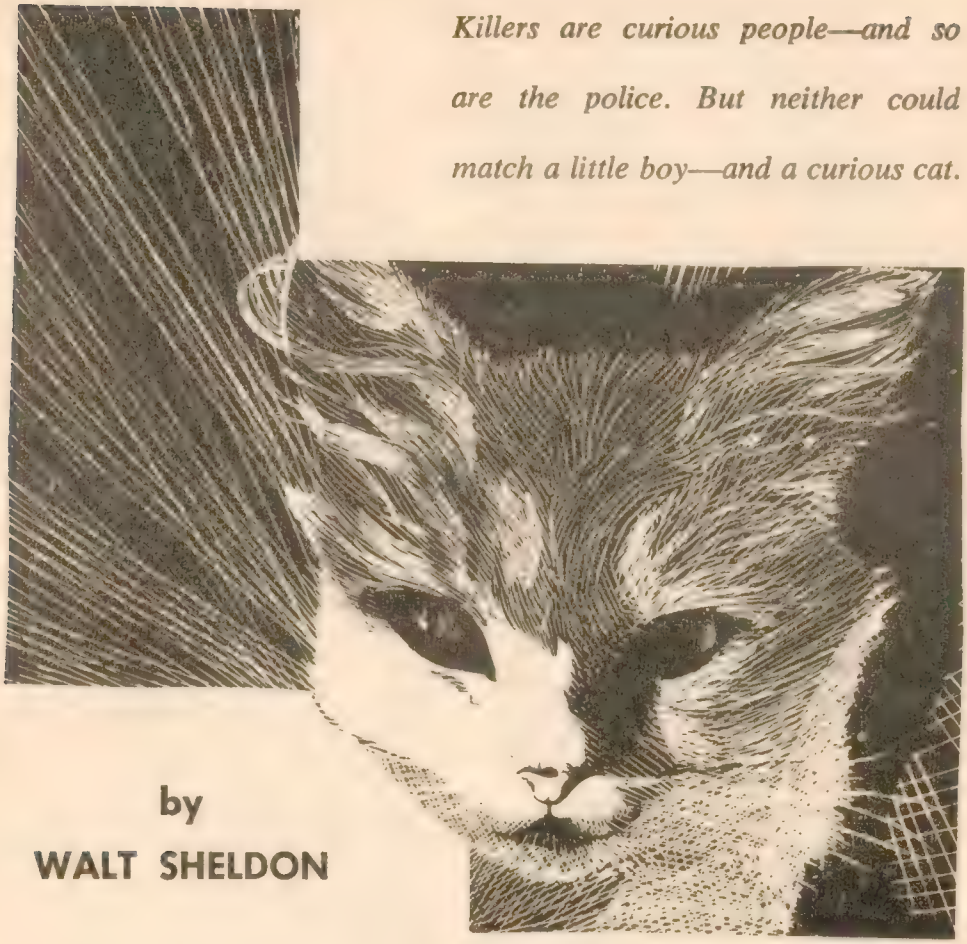
He struck out after Walt Saddler, who was growing smaller in the distance.

I watched them for a long time, watched until they were out of sight, then turned toward the house, yawning.

One thing I knew for sure. I would never again be quite so cranky about running to the storm cellar when twister weather time came around.

DEAD MAN'S CAT

Killers are curious people—and so are the police. But neither could match a little boy—and a curious cat.



by

WALT SHELDON

IT HAD RAINED throughout the early evening, and Stuart hadn't paid his usual visit to Mr. Kley and the cats next door. For this, Stuart's Uncle Harry and Aunt Hannah seemed thankful. It was their often-expressed belief that the boy was hard to approach, even a bit peculiar, whenever he returned from Kley's.

Thunder rolled outside. The window dripped rain. Uncle Harry looked at his watch and said, "Well, at least we won't have to listen to Kley's cats howling tonight."

Stuart, who was reading heard the remark. He wondered again why the mewing from their neighbor's cattery was so objectionable

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A previously published story is not necessarily a permanently preserved story, available to anyone. Too often, in fact, it is just the opposite. So transitory is magazine publication alone —usually thirty days on sale—that far too many outstanding tales are overlooked and forgotten before they have their deserved chance at fame and recognition. Here, in this new department, you will read some of the most unusual stories ever written. "Dead Man's Cat," by Walt Sheldon, is a prime example. Mr. Sheldon, quite apart from having published successfully for decades, is known primarily for the daring originality of his stories. This contribution, taken from one of the very early issues of MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, *shows why. When you are fortunate enough to see a story called "Department of Lost Stories," remember that it is a work which in the judgement of a discriminating editorial board is too outstanding to be forgotten. The present short story is no exception. Read it. You'll not forget it for a while!*

THE EDITORS

to the relatives who had given him a home. To Stuart, the cat's night-sounds were a low, smooth, pure-bred mewing, for Kley kept only pedigreed Siamese. And the sounds they made varied distinctly from those uttered by any other breed. Stuart liked to drop off to sleep, listening to the blue-eyed, cream-and-black creatures.

Well, he decided, grown-ups were like that—full of odd notions and unreasonable prejudices. Altogether, however, Stuart was far happier, living with Uncle Harry and Aunt Hannah, than he had ever been at the orphanage. They were as fond of Stuart as they were of Joe, their son, who was himself an adult now.

They merely seemed to find some of Stuart's ideas a little radical at times. Boys, they seemed to feel, shouldn't spend so much time with books and cats and other non-essential interests.

The family sat at the kitchen table now, having finished the Saturday night ice cream. Uncle Harry was scraping his pipes, making it a loving ritual as was his custom. Aunt Hannah was shelling peas for

Sunday's dinner. She would have four vegetables and six courses again, and would wonder audibly why the rest of them were unable to finish every last lick of every rich, over-flowing dish and platter.

Joe was cleaning his pistol—the sweet pungency of Hoppe's Number Nine pervaded the room. Lately, Joe spent much of his spare time cleaning the weapon, although he was merely a technician on the Red Car radios, not a regular patrolman.

A scratching sounded at the back door, a soft rustling noise barely audible above the storm.

Uncle Harry looked up first. "What's that?" he asked.

Aunt Hannah stopped dropping shelled peas in the water. "Gracious!" she exclaimed mildly. "It sounds like a dog, or something."

The expression that came over her round face was a mixture of sympathy and hope. Aunt Hannah's urge to mother all living creatures at times, in Stuart's secret opinion, caused her to overdo it.

"See what it is, will you, Stu?" asked Joe. He kept his eyes on the pistol he was cleaning.

Stuart was at the edge of the table, nearest the door. He closed his book deliberately and pushed himself slowly clear of the kitchen table. He could feel adult stares upon him, and remembered, too late, that his deliberate manner of response and action irritated them.

He tossed a quick glance, half in defiance, half in apology, then went to the door. He opened it wide. The storm roared briefly, then something scurried inside. He slammed the door, and the silence seemed sharper than before.

A large, white cat stood at Stuart's feet, dripping wet and looking very unhappy about it. The creature had left a trail of wet footprints on Aunt Hannah's spotless linoleum.

Stuart stared at the footprints and saw, with puzzled interest, that they were a bright pink, almost as though blood had been diluted with rainwater.

"It's hurt!" he said, bending down quickly.

"Gracious!" said Aunt Hannah, blinking rapidly, "Why doesn't Mr. Kley take better care of his animals!"

"It's not Mr. Kley's," said Stuart. "He only keeps purebred Siamese." Carefully, he examined the cat, pushing its fur this way and that with gently probing fingertips. "That's funny—I can't find where it's hurt."

Aunt Hannah sighed, and Uncle Harry cleared imaginary phlegm deep in his throat. These were standard reactions whenever Stuart contradicted an elder—something he often did. He did it in a gentle, patient, assured way that, he had been more than once informed, was positively infuriating.

Stuart turned the white cat over carefully, first folding its legs against

its belly with his palms, the way Mr. Kley had shown him.

"There, there, kitty," he said. It wasn't much of a cat, not by Mr. Kley's standards, anyway—just a large, white female, with a scarred ear and topaz eyes. He put it down again and said to Aunt Hannah, "It's hungry."

Aunt Hannah brightened, "Well, I suppose we'll have to give it some milk, or something," she said. Her tone was not wholly successful in concealing her warm, almost overpowering motherly instincts. She rose from her chair, only then saw the reddish pawprints on the linoleum.

"Oh dear!" she said. She found a moist rag under the sink and tossed this to Stuart. "Now don't you let him get into the living room with those bloody feet!"

"It's a her," corrected Stuart.

Uncle Harry frowned and again cleared his throat.

"Where do you suppose that blood came from?" asked Joe, leaning forward to look at the prints over the edge of the table.

"Golly, I don't know, Joe," said Stuart. "Seems to me a cat like this would run from a dog, or anything like that."

"Why, a dog would murder it!" said Joe. He ran a clean patch through the barrel of his gun.

Stuart didn't bother to argue with his cousin, though, like any cat-lover, he felt certain, conditions being equal, that a good cat could lick any dog. In the morning, he would ask Mr. Kley—after all, Mr. Kley knew everything about cats. He'd be poking about his weed-grown yard, about ten o'clock or so, and Stuart would cross their own back yard for another visit, and ask him.

The neighbors—who disapproved of the boy's visits to an elderly man they considered eccentric almost as much as Uncle Harry and Aunt Hannah—would probably see him and stand in their own back yards, looking sad and stern, as they always did.

Mr. Wooster, who didn't seem much older than Joe sometimes, would look up from his Sunday paper and shake his head. Mr. Tallemay, on the other side, would probably lean on his power-mower and sigh. Mr. Tallemay was an insurance salesman, but it always seemed to Stuart as though he had been cut out by nature rather to be a schoolteacher.

However, such were the people and problems a boy had to deal with. On the whole, he felt, Cedarshade Avenue had the orphanage beat all hollow.

THEY HAD JUST finished a late and leisurely breakfast the next morning, when the front doorbell rang. Stuart answered it. He was surprised to see a broad-shouldered policeman and a stocky, mustached man in a grey summer-weight suit. The stocky man showed a badge.

"Good morning, son," he said.

"I'm Lieutenant Garcia. The folks in?"

"Well, yes . . ." Stuart began.

By that time, Joe, in robe and slippers, had arrived. "Why, hello Lieutenant!" he said warmly. "And how are you, Jake. What are you fellows doing here?"

The lieutenant and Jake Leeds seemed surprised, too. Garcia said, "Didn't realize I'd find you here, Joe. That's a break for us. We came to find out a few things about your neighbor, Kley."

"Oh, oh!" said Joe, his eyebrows rising. "What's *he* done?"

"Gone and got himself murdered," Garcia replied.

When they were seated in the living room, Aunt Hannah insisted on bringing them coffee and breakfast buns. Both Garcia and Jake were quite positive that they were not in line for fried ham and eggs, or even apple pie.

Stuart stood a little to one side of the dining room door, holding the white cat and trying to feel sorry for poor old Mr. Kley. At the same time, he felt thrilled and delighted albeit guiltily at the fact of a murder investigation right next door, right on Cedarshade.

"I notice," began Lieutenant Gracia, moving his keen dark eyes about to show that there was little he *didn't* notice, "that you have a pretty good view of Kley's place from your kitchen. You happen to see anything last night? Between seven and ten, say?"

Uncle Harry gave the answers. He was the man of the house, after all. Stuart heard him clear his throat, then say, "Usually, we can see what's going on over there. But it was raining and thundering last night, so we didn't notice much. We didn't see Kley turn his lights out at nine, but he ain't missed that bedtime of his as long as we been here."

"He always goes to bed at nine, then? Never earlier?" Garcia looked significantly at Jake, the patrolman. Jake Leeds was trying to balance his coffee on one knee.

"Never that we've known of," said Uncle Harry thoughtfully.

"Well, that ought to narrow it down," said Garcia. Stuart saw him look at Joe. "The doc figures some time between seven and ten. Kley was in bed, or had been in bed, when he was killed. So it's likely it was between nine and ten. Thanks —that may prove useful."

Uncle Harry beamed, and Stuart looked at him, then turned back to watch Lieutenant Garcia as he began talking again, still directing his remarks chiefly to Joe.

"We got the call over an hour ago. There's a cleaning woman comes to Kley's place every Sunday, and she found the body. I've checked your other neighbors—Wooster and Tallemay—and neither of them seems to know very much about it."

"Any suspects?" Uncle Harry's voice was conspiratorial.

The stocky detective's eye twinkled. "No, not a one." He leaned back and inserted the tip of a little fingernail between two of his front teeth. He withdrew it, smacking. "*You* have any ideas?" he asked.

"No . . ." Uncle Harry drew out the word ponderously. "None I can think of." He frowned and pursed his lips. "Nobody liked old Kley much, but I don't think anybody hated him enough to kill him."

"Why was he disliked?" Garcia asked, in a heavily offhand way.

"Well . . ." the word was drawn out again. "The cats, for one thing. They keep everybody awake. Ed Wooster, next door, even threatened to buy a dog and sic it on the cats, although I doubt if Wooster could afford a collar, let alone a dog.

"Another thing is the way Kley let his house go to seed. It's all broken down, a regular eyesore in the neighborhood. Tallemay— he lives on the other side of us— always said there ought to be a law about it."

"Did Kley keep large sums of money in the house?" Garcia asked suddenly.

"Search me," said Uncle Harry.

Stuart saw the detective nod. "All right," he said. "Just wanted to see if you knew. Matter of fact, we found a strongbox busted open. We think somebody was burgling the house, and Kley surprised him at it. He was shot through the head with a thirty-two caliber—"

Aunt Hannah gasped.

"Excuse me," said Garcia, but went right on. "There are no footprints outside, on account of the stone flagging. Some mud in the house, but it doesn't tell much. Anyway, the rain's covered things up pretty much in general."

"Find the weapon?" Joe asked suddenly. Stuart felt his eyes widen.

Garcia shook his head. "Nope. But it'll turn up. They usually do." He rose then, and Jake rose with him. "Well, thanks for your help . . ."

"Any time. Any time at all! Uncle Harry beamed. He showed the officers to the door.

Minutes later, while Uncle Harry and Aunt Hannah were still oh-ing and ah-ing about it, Stuart caught Joe's arm as he was about to go upstairs.

"Joe," he said, "can I go over

to Mr. Kley's and watch them make fingerprints and everything?"

"Gosh, no, kid," laughed Joe. "They wouldn't want you underfoot. Anyway, they're probably through with most of the routine stuff by now."

"Then I wouldn't be underfoot."

Devastating logic—Joe scowled. "Well . . ." he said, drawing it out like Uncle Harry. Stuart knew, by the length of the pause, that he had won. He walked across the backyard with Joe.

AT KLEY'S HOUSE, Lieutenant Garcia was surprisingly agreeable. "Sure, kid," he said, on the porch. "The old man's gone to the morgue, and we're just picking up stuff for lab analysis now, so you won't bother us. Do you good to see how the police work on a case like this. More kids ought to take an interest."

Kley's gingerbread, Queen Anne-Victorian, old paint-starved home stood on Senate Avenue, back-to-back with the houses on Cedarshade. Stuart had always thought it exciting that Kley's house had been there before all the others, before the shade trees and the sewers, before the telephones and electric lights. Inside, the old house was jammed with tall, elaborate, dark wood furniture, with musty books, and lay pervaded with the smell of another century. It was all most satisfactory to the thirteen-year-old boy.

The gaunt widower who lived there had always fascinated Stuart, too. Mr. Kley had loved to talk by the hour about cats, and, unlike the adults in the neighborhood, Stuart provided him with an audience. In return, the boy had been privileged to poke about the debris-stacked rooms and attic, to play with the seven magnificent cats. He also spent silent, introverted young-adolescent hours in the old yard, with its cracked flagstones, chipped birdbath, crumbling brick wall and dry well.

Stuart, big-eyed with excitement, went inside. He was very quiet and tried not to trip over rugs or bump into furniture. A small, sour-faced man with gold trimmed glasses glanced at him, then went back to making notes.

From upstairs came the sound of a vacuum sweeper. Jake Leeds had his hat on again. He stood near the door, watching and waiting for orders. There was a faint smell of antiseptic.

Something moved atop the bookcase. *"Ting!"* said Stuart.

Ting was a magnificent big Siamese male. He arched his back, leaped suddenly to Stuart's shoulders, settled there, and began to purr.

"We're sending all these cats to the S.P.C.A.," Garcia told Joe. "Sure are a lot of 'em. They managed to make bloody footprints all over the place, which doesn't help a bit."

"Bloody footprints!" said Joe.

Stuart, still holding the cat, turned his head. "What's the matter—you know something?" asked Garcia.

Joe replied, "A cat—a big, white alley cat—scratched at our door last night, and we let it in. It had bloody footprints. The rain had washed a lot off, of course, but you could still see them."

"That's a funny one." Garcia wrinkled his brow. "What time did this happen?"

"Oh, a little after nine, I guess." said Joe, frowning. "I don't know exactly."

Garcia looked around the high vaulted room. "That white cat of yours must have got out with the killer. Mrs. Schultz found the house locked this morning."

"The white cat didn't belong to Mr. Kley," said Stuart, his voice a little uncertain now that he had interrupted.

"It didn't?" Garcia turned quickly toward the boy. "You sure?"

"Mr. Kley kept only pureblooded Siamese. He wouldn't look at an alley-cat."

Garcia put a hand to his chin and said, "Well, that's a funny one, all right. I'll have a look at that cat. Maybe we can trace it. Although there must be a million white cats around."

Stuart was already thinking about something else. He cleared his throat and interrupted again. "Could I take care of Ting instead of the S.P.C.A.?" He stroked the big male. "Take him home, I mean?"

"What?" said Joe. "Two cats in the house?"

"I'd take care of him just as good as the S.P.C.A.—even better." Stuart was talking to Garcia.

"Well, I don't see why not," said Garcia.

Joe spread his hands, helplessly. "You'll have to see what your Uncle Harry says, Stuart."

Stuart nodded. He was already making plans for handling Uncle Harry. He stood there and continued to stroke the cat, while Joe and Lieutenant Garcia talked. He didn't fully understand everything they said, but he found it engrossing all the same. Garcia was using a slightly complaining tone.

"Your friends, the Tallemays, are pretty sure Kley did keep money in the house," he said. "They think it must have been in small bills. Kley never trusted banks, they tell me. There'll be hardly any chance of tracing that. I'll bet my shirt the grooves on the bullet won't match anything in the files.

"This guy picked a good night to do the job. On account of the rain, nobody saw him, on account of the thunder, nobody heard him. Another thing, when it's plain robbery, it's hard to find connections between the killer and the victim. Could've been anybody. Could've been purely a professional job,

could've been anybody in the neighborhood."

"What about time alibis?" asked Joe.

Garcia shrugged. "Your family's the only one with any kind of an alibi. Wooster says he was out getting cigarettes and looking at the magazines in the drugstore around nine o'clock. Tallemay says he was in his cellar, doing woodwork, while Mrs. Tallemay was reading in the living room. Either of them could have slipped out and done it. But that's not important unless we get other reasons for suspicion."

Soft mewing came from the cattery, just off the kitchen. It had been a pantry originally, but the open door showed stacked cat cages and feeding bowls on the floor, along with shreds of cloth, spools and things cats love to play with.

"Cats!" sighed Garcia.

"Yeah," agreed Joe. He looked at Stuart.

"Dogs would've barked their heads off," Garcia observed.

Stuart sprang to the defense of all the world's cats. "Mr. Kley said that Siamese cats used to be bodyguards. That was what he had Ting for."

"And a lot of good Ting was," Joe said caustically. He turned to Garcia. "Well, we'll run along now, Lieutenant, I hope the case breaks for you soon."

"It will," Garcia said confidently.

Back home, Joe and Stuart sat on the sunporch. They could hear Aunt Hannah in the kitchen, and they could look through the open doors of the living room and see her cross from the cupboard to the stove at frequent, irregular intervals. Murder or no murder, there was going to be Sunday dinner, all six courses of it.

They could see Ting, the big Siamese male, sniffing at the cellar door, stretching his tawny body, balancing himself lightly on his seal-stockinged paws. The white cat was still in the cellar. Uncle Harry was upstairs. He didn't know about Ting yet.

"Cats, cats!" said Joe sadly. "I almost don't blame the guy for shooting anybody who raises 'em."

"Well, he must have been pretty mean," retorted Stuart. He swiveled his head in the direction of Kley's house. "I'll bet I could find some clues over there, so we could catch him."

"Now, listen, Stu." Joe pointed a warning finger. "Don't you go getting any crazy ideas. The police know what they're doing—remember that. We have more trouble with people who try to help us look for clues. Crimes are solved by hard work, by routine administrative detail."

Stuart felt that Joe must be quoting one of his police textbooks, but he nodded and pretended interest.

"They've probably found fingerprints," said Joe. "They'll send 'em to Washington, where they have

prints of everybody who's ever looked inside a police station or taken a draft-board exam. Sometimes, they get a lead that way. More than likely, one of the department's regular informers will have an idea who did the job—or one of the killer's friends will have a beef against him and phone in a tip—or the gun will turn up and have a traceable purchase record.

"Any time anybody commits murder, one of the first things they do is hide the gun in a nearby sewer, or something. The funny thing, they usually try to get it back later."

"Maybe the gun's still over there somewhere," said Stuart.

Joe chuckled. "I doubt it," he said. "Killers aren't that dumb!"

Stuart looked away, frowning. He knew Joe was still grinning at him. He sank more deeply into the white wicker chair that was part of the sunporch set. He gazed out of the south window and saw Ed Wooster sitting on his front step, reading a newspaper, as usual.

Wooster was a little on the plump side and had a receding, uneven hairline. Stuart watched him for a moment, then turned his head to the north window of the sunporch, through which he could see Tallemay's front door.

Tallemay was edging his driveway. He was a very small man with a rather large head. Uncle Harry had once remarked that he looked like an egg balanced on a broomstick. Murder not withstanding,

Sunday was still Sunday on Cedarshade Avenue, Stuart decided.

"Dinner's ready!" called Aunt Hannah from the kitchen. Yes, it was still Sunday.

It developed, however, into the noisiest Sunday in a long time. The telephone rang incessantly—mostly friends of Hannah, who wanted to hear all about the terrible thing that had happened.

Uncle Harry himself called a few of his cronies, to tell them how he had worked with the police on the murder. He attained such expansive mood that he said Stuart could keep the cats—both of them—almost without persuasion.

Garcia showed up a little later. He gave the white cat a careful inspection, but wound up shrugging and shaking his head.

"It doesn't tell me anything," he said, "But it still bothers me. It doesn't fit in with the rest."

Stuart didn't say so, but he felt the same way. He had an idea about the white cat that he supposed the others, being grownups, would immediately label as fantastic if he mentioned it. So he kept quiet, and let the wheels of thought turn over and over in his thirteen-year-old head.

After Garcia left, he played with his new pets. He kept them separated by the cellar door and divided his time between them. He couldn't get his mind off the thought of clues remaining undiscovered at poor Mr. Kley's house. He kept thinking about them, in spite of Joe's lecture on police efficiency.

Maybe the police had made a thorough search, but Stuart would almost have bet his new cats that he could hide something they couldn't find. Any boy could—boys delighted in finding places grownups would never think of.

Stuart remained quiet all through the evening meal. Aunt Hannah grew concerned at this departure from the usual.

"What's the matter, honey?" she asked anxiously. "You aren't eating enough to fill a sparrow."

Uncle Harry merely chuckled and patted Stuart on the shoulder. He was in a wonderful mood.

Stuart surprised them all by going to bed without one word of argument—without even a single request to stay up just a little later. He surprised them so much that they forgot to raise any objections when he picked up Ting, and took the big Siamese male upstairs with him.

Late that night, Stuart was still awake. The rest of the family had retired, and the house was quiet, save for the familiar, yet ever-strange, night noises. Stuart lay propped against his pillow staring out through the window at the dark silhouette of Kley's house, at the broken shadow-on-shadow of the court, with its old well and L-shaped brick wall.

The big shade trees pawed the breeze with their leaves, fingered it with their branches. Shadows made by moonlight flickered across the window-sill.

Ting mewed. He was at the door.

"Come here, Ting," whispered Stuart. Above all things, he did not want the cat to wake anybody this first night in his new home.

Ting mewed again, and stayed where he was.

Stuart considered for a moment, then slipped out of bed and donned sneakers and dungarees. With his pajama coat flopping about his waist, he made his way silently to the door downstairs.

Outside, Ting half-crouched at Stuart's feet and surveyed the terrain. His tail twitched. He took a few tentative, darting leaps in the direction of the old house.

Stuart looked up at Joe's window. It was open, but the light was off, and all was quiet. He turned, then, and slowly followed the cat.

Almost before he knew it, he and the animal were moving stealthily on Kley's weed-grown, flagstoned terrace. Stuart was talking softly to Ting.

"Whoever killed Mr. Kley," he murmured, "must have brought the white cat in with him. I'll bet the white cat got out, and he had to chase him. But he couldn't come to our door and let us see him. So, if he got rid of anything, it must have been out here in the yard. Get it?"

Ting mewed softly, as though he understood. He arched his back, then stretched, then opened his mouth wide in a yawn, revealing white teeth in contrast to his dark, seal-brown face.

Stuart tested first all the loose flags underfoot. There was plenty of moonlight and visibility was good, but he searched without result. He then made a careful search along the hedge—and drew another blank. There was a small space under the back porch, and he investigated this. But there was nothing to be found. He went over the brick wall carefully. He knew of some loose bricks, with compartments behind them. But he found nothing there, either.

The cat divided his time between interest in Stuart's project and leaping off by itself in independent softies, though never for more than a few yards.

"Come on, Ting," Stuart whispered. "Let's try the well."

The well had once been an object alive and bright, a symbol of life giving, a center of the life it gave. But it had withered with the house and the coming of new things—the paved streets, the water mains, the electricity, the shiny automobiles.

The well curb rose three feet above the surrounding grass, and was surmounted by weathered beams and a roof of loose shingles. Ivy and weeds grew thick upon it. Dry clay crumbled in the cracks between the stones.

Stuart, without hesitation, scrambled over the curb and began to climb down the inside of the shaft. He had done it many times before. He knew each foothold on each rough stone, and he made the thirty-foot descent quickly and without mishap.

The moon was almost directly overhead; and there was light on the well-floor. Stuart searched it carefully, and he felt the darker portions by patting every square inch with his palms. He discovered only the dry rock and dirt, which was always there. He frowned and sighed, then climbed back up the wall, to find Ting at the top, sitting and watching impassively.

"I guess Joe was right after all," he told the big Siamese.

He walked slowly back across the flagstones. Halfway, his eye was caught by the chipped stone bird bath. He stopped.

"One more place to look," he said.

The cat had already come to a halt with him and was staring around and up and down, as Siamese cats do. Stuart stepped to the bird bath and tilted it. The hollow place underneath was one of those crannies only a boy would know about.

Stuart drew a quick, inward breath. His heart began to beat against his ribs. Still holding the bath tilted, he bent for a closer view. A small revolver lay there.

The cat leaped to Stuart's shoulder, but he scarcely noticed it. This was—surely this had to be—the gun that had killed Mr. Kley. It was new, and it was black. Stuart decided it was a thirty-two, just as Lieutenant Garcia had said. Wait until Joe saw it, he thought, his pulses pounding.

More—it would be in the paper, in print, telling how Stuart had found the weapon. They might even publish his picture. It might lead to the capture of poor old Mr. Kley's killer, just as Joe had explained.

Behind him, a footstep scraped on a flagstone.

Stuart let the bird bath drop and spun about. The unexpectedness of the sound made the backs of his hands prickle, made his insides feel suddenly hollow.

"Well!" said a hearty voice. "Aren't you up a little late, Stuart?"

It took the boy some moments to realize that it was only Ed Wooster who stood there, rather than one of the fierce hooded killers seen on the Late Late Show. Wooster's plump figure was fully clad, which struck Stuart as odd for so late at night.

Stuart said, "Hello, Mr. Wooster. Golly, you scared me!" He pointed at the bird bath. "You know what's under there? A gun—the one that killed Mr. Kley, I'll bet. The police couldn't find it."

"You don't say," said Wooster. He took a step forward. "Better let me take it and turn it over to the police. That's valuable evidence for a boy like you to be fooling around with, you know."

Stuart stayed where he was. "No, sir, Mr. Wooster. I'm going to give it to Joe."

"Now look, Stuart. I can take it to the police just as well. It's not a job for a boy to do. You see, a gun like that might have fingerprints on it, and the police will want to see them. You might smear the prints, or something."

"I'll pick it up by the barrel," said Stuart. "With cloth. With my pajamas." He fingered one corner of his sleeping garment.

He wasn't going to let any grown-up do this job for him—especially not Ed Wooster. Uncle Harry was always saying that Ed Wooster wasn't a responsible citizen, which seemed to be something pretty bad from the face Un-

cle Harry always made when he said it.

"Stuart," Wooster said. "Get away from that bird bath!" His voice was no longer hearty.

"No, sir, Mr. Wooster," said Stuart stubbornly. The cat on his shoulder had stopped purring.

"Stuart—look. I'm very anxious to give that revolver to the police, myself. I—er—want to get a parking ticket fixed. I'll tell you what—I'll give you five dollars if you'll let me have it."

Stuart stood up to him as a succession of thoughts spun rapidly through his head. Five dollars to Stuart, was a lot of money. Mr. Wooster must be mighty rich all of a sudden, if he could afford to give five dollars away like this. But Uncle Harry was always saying that Mr. Wooster never had any money. Maybe Mr. Wooster had got himself a lot of money somewhere. Maybe . . .

But how did Wooster know that the gun under the bird bath was a revolver?

Stuart's voice sounded strange in his ears, and there was a catch in it, almost as if he were about to burst out crying. "Mr. Wooster," he said, "I think I better call Joe."

Wooster came for him in a sudden, savage lunge.

Stuart tried to scream, but his throat was dry, and he couldn't utter a sound. He dodged to one side and found himself against the brick wall. He was in the corner of the L. There was no escape.

Wooster charged in, with his arms slightly spread and his fingers crooked. His face, in the moonlight, was contorted. "The well!" he whispered as if to himself. "A fall! Nobody will know!"

Stuart did the only thing he could think of. He threw the cat at him.

Wooster screamed. Stuart didn't realize why he had screamed until an instant later. The he saw that Ting was a whirling, spitting, crazy pinwheel of teeth and claws—all of his fury in Wooster's face, on his neck, his arms, his shoulders.

Wooster swore, moaned, screamed and swore again. He finally managed to grip the cat.

Stuart squirmed from the angle of the wall, and began running across his own backyard. *Joe! Joe!"* He yelled at the top of his lungs.

He heard the cat wail suddenly, and knew that Wooster must have thrown it off. He heard Wooster pounding after him.

Stuart let out a long, shrill, desperate cry of pure terror . . .

"Hold it, Wooster!" It was Joe's voice—from the window. Stuart's knees felt weak. He looked up and saw the pistol in Joe's hand.

Word's tumbled from Stuart's mouth. "He killed Mr. Kley—Mr. Wooster killed him! I found the gun under the bird bath and he

tried to get it, and he came after me, and I wouldn't let him!"

Wooster swayed for just a moment, then whirled and started to run in the opposite direction.

"Stop!" Joe yelled at him.

Mr. Wooster kept on running.

"Stop, or I'll shoot, Wooster!" Joe sounded determined.

Joe's pistol went off, twice, as windows all around the neighborhood rumbled upward.

Afterward, Garcia told them what the doctor had said. The detective was having coffee in the living room with the family.

"Doc didn't know which to treat first," he said. "The bullet wounds in Wooster's legs, or the lacerations on his face and neck."

Aunt Hannah was urging sandwiches on everyone, her round face becoming increasingly desolate with each refusal.

"I never figured a cat could do that much damage," added Garcia.

"But Ting was trained," said Stuart. He noticed, suddenly, that everybody seemed to be giving serious consideration to whatever he said. "Mr. Kley told me Siamese cats used to be bred just exactly for that—for bodyguards."

Lieutenant Garcia blinked his dark eyes and nodded. "He must have mentioned that to Wooster, too. In his confession, Wooster says he picked up the white alley-cat and took it in with him when he went after the strong box. He figured the female would distract Ting, in case Kley tried to sic Ting on him. But he panicked when Kley caught him in the act. Says he didn't really mean to shoot." Garcia shrugged. "They always say that."

"Well, I'm sorry it all happended," said Uncle Harry, shifting in his chair. "But at least, now, we won't have that infernal howling in the yard every night. I'm thankful for that."

From the kitchen, came an alto moan. It was joined, almost immediately, by a soprano call from the other side of the cellar door. Ting stood there, pawing at the knob of the door. The love duet reached an unearthly level of discord.

Uncle Harry groaned.

Stuart, sleepy now, lowered his eyelids and leaned back in his chair, the better to enjoy the sound.

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Good Sister Frances

He was just another kill-for-pay rubout man. At least he had been. Now pieces of him were strewn all over my landscape—and I had some tall explaining to do . . .

by M. G. OGAN

SOME PEOPLE PLAY the piano well—that's their talent. Others can combine paint, canvas, and imagination to create a masterpiece. My talent is explosives and how to use them for the greastest effect. I'm employed by the Tulsa Oil and Gas Company, traveling to and from their producing wells and drilling rigs all over the world.

My headquarters is New Orleans, convenient by air or sea to anywhere these days. I'm paid well for shattering dome-rock with charges of nitro, or making seismographic shots, without blowing out a casing or hunks of terrain.

Name your explosive and I can tell you how to fuse and use it—I learned my trade in Korea, getting bridges and other objectives the aircraft couldn't hit.

I'm a bachelor with no dependents and a five figure yearly income, so I have investments, one of which nearly got me married to Cousin Owen Lattimore's private secretary, but my "Dear John" letter from Mary Anne reached me down in Saudi Arabia.

Owen's company is Mifflin Electronics over in Glover, Texas—I met Mary Anne when I purchased a large chunk of Mifflin preferred

stock from Owen, figuring to write it off as a tax loss because Mifflin was shaky back in those days.

I lost Mary Anne, but Mifflin dividends moved me up into a higher tax bracket. Counting my money coming in from Mifflin on a quarterly basis, I nearly forgot that I'd loved Mary Anne.

Tulsa Oil has a branch office in New Orleans. Kay Jordan is the receptionist and girl-of-all-work for such transient Tulsa employees who come through. It isn't a big branch office.

Kay is a tall and stately woman my age, thirty-nine. She's always awed me just a bit. In some ways I

guess I'm a pretty tough character. Working around does that to a man. There had always been a tinge of disdain for me in any of my dealings with Kay.

"There's a woman outside who won't give me her name," Kay said, coming into my office where I was studying some Venazuela reports. "Do you care to see her?"

I didn't have to answer that question, because Mary Anne had silently followed Kay down the carpeted corridor. "How are you, Mark?"

I was more than a little shaken up. Kay read the situation right and disappeared.

"Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"

Marriage had put some fine lines around Mary Anne's green eyes, but her hair was black as ever, and maturity had improved both her face and figure.

"Sure. Sit down."

I stood up, finally.

Mary Anne sat down.

I stayed on my feet. She was still using the very expensive perfume I remembered and it was heady in my small office.

"What brings you to New Orleans?" I finally asked, when Mary Anne sat and smiled.

"I've come to see you," she said, adding, "about Owen. He's in trouble and needs your help or advice. Is there anywhere we can talk privately?"

"I have a bachelor pad in a high-rise building with a bar and a nice view of the river and French Quarter," I said. "It's five o'clock and the sun is over the yardarm. Can you use a drink?"

"I need one badly."

On our way out, I told Kay that I wouldn't be back that day, and would call in the morning. Kay's eyes stripped Mary Anne to the skin before she smiled brightly and said, "Of course, Mr. Ryan."

"That's certainly a catty woman," Mary Anne said in the elevator. "Why don't you fire her?"

"You haven't changed much," I told Mary Anne. "Do you get your kicks having people fired?"

"Why, Mark! You're bitter."

"No. More observant, perhaps, but not bitter."

While Mary Anne freshened up in my apartment I mixed a pitcher of martinis. She gulped the first one as if she'd been lost on the desert for three days.

"Look out you don't choke on that olive," I said. "What's with Cousin Owen these days?"

"He's in very bad trouble, Mark."

She watched me refill her stemmed glass. Mary Anne sipped this drink. "Haven't you wondered why Mifflin has paid such good dividends lately?"

I laughed. "I'd better give you the facts of financial life, Mary Anne. A stockholder seldom wonders about the money-makers. It's the cats and dogs that never show a dime profit he thinks about."

"Owen is in danger of losing his life," she said in a solemn voice. "He borrowed money from the wrong people in Chicago. That was three years ago. He's paid it back, with compound interest, but now has silent partners. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Cosa Nostra, Mafia, the Syndicate, whatever your name for it is, has muscled into Mifflin Electronics. Am I right? It's a common pattern these days. The boys want to invest in legitimate enterprises, so they do, but in their own fashion. What else is new?"

"Owen tried to cheat them."

"That's unhealthy." My cousin fell into Mifflin by inheritance from my father's brother. He's the bluff and hearty type, with a suntan from the golf course. Not stupid—he got his degree at M.I.T.—but he has a sly streak that makes him think he can get away with things that other people can't.

"How hot is the heat?"

"Threats over the phone."

"Unless he does, what?"

"Buy back your shares of stock and turn them over so they'll have full control."

"Did Owen send you to me?"

"No. I'm supposed to be visiting my good sister, Frances, down in Houston. She's only my half sister, but sometimes I like to talk to Frances. She's at the good sisters of Mary convent. I have problems, too, Mark."

"Such as?"

"I don't love Owen."

"Why did you marry him?"

"I can't tell you that, but it wasn't because I didn't love you."

Now I gulped my drink.

"We'd better go eat, Mary Anne," I said. "This conversation is getting too complex for me on an empty stomach."

"Me, too," she confessed. "Take me somewhere nice. Owen has such rotten taste!"

I took her to Antoine's and we had broiled Red Snapper with a dated Chablis, and liqueur with demi-tasse. "You're like a cold drink of water to me, Mark," Mary Anne said once.

"I don't want to sell my Mifflin stock." I said.

Mary Anne shrugged, as if that no longer mattered.

"Just the same," I went on, "I'd better go to Glover for a chat with Owen. I'm sure we can work out something."

"I was hoping you'd say that," she said.

We returned to my apartment. It was a new ball game now. Call it by your own name, Mary Anne had it, and always had.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful to be out of this world for just one night, Mark?" she said.

We were sipping Drambuie at my bar and watching the twinkling lights across the wide bend in the Mississippi. "That's the world out there." I nodded toward the night scene. "We're in here."

"I want you, Mark."

"Why?" We'd never been intimate while we were engaged. Now she was Owen's wife. Owen was my cousin. Owen was her husband. Other short thoughts shot through my mind, but none disturbed my rising blood.

"Well, hell, why not?" I said, finally. "We can discuss motives later."

We never did get around to a discussion of her motives. The summer night wasn't long enough for talk.

Mary Anne made our breakfast the next morning. I kissed her goodbye—she was driving back to Glover.

"When will you be coming to Glover?" she asked.

"I've changed my mind," I told her. "I'll write to Owen, or perhaps call him on the phone."

"I'm going to divorce Owen," she said, "or persuade him to divorce me. Doesn't that mean something to you, Mark?"

"I don't know yet."

Mary Anne's was a satisfied laugh. "You'll come to Glover, and soon," she said.

I MAKE UP my own bed—it's a habit I learned in the service. I discovered the electronic "bug" under my pillow. *Mifflin* was the trademark.

It was a radio transmitter type device, so Mary Anne had to have an accomplice nearby making tapes as we made love, and said to each other—what? I couldn't remember much of our talk, even what it was about, but I did remember making a few remarks about Owen.

I phoned Kay Jordan and told her I would be out of town a few days.

"How nice for you," she said. "Or is it?"

"If you want a full report, wait until I get back," I told her.

Kay was getting under my skin. Her laughter over the phone, before I hung up, told me that she knew it, too. I damned women and drove for Glover.

I had a tail in a gray Buick sedan. I always go armed when I can, with the Smith & Wesson Model 60 in a quick-draw shoulder holster, .38 special caliber with a two-inch barrel made from stainless steel. I considered waylaying the man in the Buick, in case he was carrying the tapes, but decided against it.

I had a number of sound reasons for not trying that ploy—he was probably too smart to have the tapes on him. He might have a private investigator's license; he might be able to shoot me before I could cover him.

He played it cool and distant, so I didn't get a good glimpse of him during the drive to Glover. I found Owen had a new split-level home in the ultra fashionable part of Glover, Hill Avenue. I parked down the street, but changed my mind about going in.

Instead, I drove through Glover to check into the Aztec Motel, and await developments. I didn't have to wait long. The phone in my room rang ten minutes after I'd checked in.

"Mark?" It was Owen's hearty voice, turned gruff and hostile.

"Yes, it's Mark here," I said.

"I want to see you right away."

I paused to think. Obviously, the tapes had now been delivered.

"Mark?"

"I'm still with you, Owen," I said. "Why don't you meet me out here at the Aztec? I'll be on the second stool from the end of the bar."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," Owen promised.

I took a shower and changed clothes. When I stepped out of my room, there was a loud *crump* in the direction of Glover. In Saigon I would have thought a rocket had hit. At the Aztec I didn't think much about it, one way or another.

It was forty-five minutes before anyone took the bar stool to the left of mine. I'd nursed a scotch and water that long. A younger man flanked me on the right.

"My name's Randall," the older man said, "and my partner over there is John Burley. We're on the homicide detail of the Glover police department." He showed me the badge pinned to his wallet. "Go ahead, order another drink, and we'll take beer," he told me. "This round is on us."

Randall was a graying man with a lined face and eyes that were permanently saddened by the atrocities they'd witnessed. The right corner of his mouth was drawn down by a scar. "Owen Lattimore just blew himself up when he tried to start his sports car," Randall told me. "He was coming here to see you, so his wife says. You wanted it that way."

"Is he dead?"

"Very dead," Burley told me. His was a handsome young face that was hardening. "We understand you're an expert with explosives. Is that right?"

"That's right, I am."

Randall drank his beer from the bottle. "Would you come to the Lattimore place with us and give an expert's opinion?"

"About what?"

"The explosion. We're too small

a force to have a bomb detail. We'd like your opinion."

"And maybe you can tell us why Lattimore was coming out here to see you," Burley said.

I caught the negative shake of Randall's head from the corner of my eye.

"No problem there," I said. "I believe he had two reasons. He wanted my stock in the Mifflin Company, and I've committed adultery with his wife. She brought someone to New Orleans with her to furnish Owen with the taped evidence. Maybe photographs, come to think about it. You can do a lot with infra red techniques these days."

"No photos," Randall said, wearily. "Just tapes. A man named Wilson has them. Owen was to pick them up, with a recorder, on his way to see you."

I'd finished my third drink. "Who is Wilson?"

"We don't know. He's another voice on the phone to us. If we ever pick him up, we can match his speech to his recorded voice pattern, but his type professional is hard to nab."

"What is his profession?"

"He kills for pay. Shall we go?"

"In your car, or mine? I don't feel much like punching my starter button right now."

"You're okay under the hood," Burley said. "We went over your car before we rifled your room. Do you want to see our John Doe warrants?"

I shook my head. "Not necessary. I'm sure you have them. I take it that someone is fitting me into a frame."

"You're right," Burley told me. "Mrs. Lattimore, if it is a frame. With motive, opportunity, and know-how, I like you for this one, Ryan."

"Don't mind John," Randall said easily as he paid for the last round of drinks. "He's a conclusion jumper. He'll grow out of it."

Owen's MG had exploded in the drive in front of his car port. Gelignite had been used—the smell of its potassium nitrate base, and oxidized wood pulp filler, was still in the air.

The neighbors and others who'd come to the scene were roped out of the yard. What was left of Owen was tucked in a plastic bag that lay in the middle of his freshly mowed front lawn. A young uniformed officer stood at his head, staring up at the stars so he didn't have to see again what lay at his feet.

The roof of the car port had been peeled back like a hat brim by the force of the explosion; the MG's body had peppered the neighborhood, luckily striking only house fronts. Nearly all the front windows in homes on that block had been cracked or shattered.

I examined what was left of the chassis. Then I saw it in the pitted drive—the trigger device. It was the

size of a package of nickels; made from stainless steel.

I held it out in the palm of my hand to Randall.

"A high frequency radio wave set off the charge planted directly under the driver's seat," I said. "Whoever blasted Owen made sure he'd kill no one else by mistake. I'd say he parked under that large tree down at the next corner." I pointed. "From there he could see Owen come out to start his car."

"We have a statement from two of the neighbors that a car burned rubber getting out from under that tree just before the blast," Randall told me. No make, color, or license number."

"Buick, maybe?"

Randall shrugged. "No one knows."

"It could have been a Mercury," Burley told me.

I drive a Monterey Mercury four-door.

"It wasn't," I assured him. "Where's Mary Anne?"

"In the kitchen," Randall told me. "A policewoman is with her. Are you sure you want to see her?"

"Very sure."

"Come on." He signaled Burley to wait out in front.

Mary Anne sat slumped at the kitchen table, elbows on it; face in her hands. An empty cup and a saucer were in front of her. A trim, pretty young policewoman was standing over in a corner, still sipping her coffee.

Mary Anne looked up and directly at me. "Why did you kill Owen that way?"

"What other way of killing him did you have in mind?" I asked, and drew a startled glance from the young policewoman.

I turned to Randall. "Let's get out of here and go somewhere we can talk."

"There's my place," Randall said, when we'd stepped outside the back door. "We'll leave my partner here."

"That suits me," I told him.

Randall's was a small but freshly painted cottage on a side street of large, shabby homes. He led me through an orderly living room to a spotless kitchen. He took two cans of beer from the refrigerator and punched them open.

"You really didn't kill Lattimore, did you?" was the first thing he said.

"No."

"We're supposed to book you for the crime, of course. There could be a conviction, with Mary Anne perjuring herself, in exchange for a short jolt as unwitting accessory, who should have contacted the police, nevertheless. You see, our prosecutor here in Glover has become a wealthy man lately on a small official salary. Chicago wants the town as well as Mifflin, so this is a high stake game."

"I'm beginning to realize that."

"You've only seen my local credentials. I have others. I'm telling

you this because I want something in exchange."

"Your other credentials check back to Washington, D. C., say the Department of Justice?"

Randall nodded. "You can check me if you want. Or you can trust me."

"I'll trust you."

"Good. Here's the box you're in. I should have you down at the station right now, booking you on suspicion. We'd soon have a train of witnesses linking you to the crime, and you'd better believe that."

"After hearing Mary Anne, I believe it!"

"She been their wedge into Mifflin, of course," Randall said. "She was sent down to hire on as Owen's private secretary for a specific reason. When it looked as if you might buy controlling interest of the company, she switched to you, but it didn't work out that way, so Mary Anne married Owen."

"I remember talking with Owen about more stock when that I owned began to show a profit. Then I got shot off to somewhere I can't remember now and the deal died on the vine."

Randall nodded. "Before we can make a move, we need to know who sent Mary Anne to Glover. We need a name. We don't have one. A dummy corporation up in Chicago holds the Mifflin stock extorted from Lattimore. We can't penetrate the facade."

"I don't think I can help you."

Randall scowled. "I have a strong hunch you can. She's mentioned something or someone to you, perhaps, that means nothing, to you. It may mean a great deal to us."

"She's never told me much about herself, except she came off a North Dakota dirt farm to take a secretarial course in Chicago when her parents died."

"We've checked that much. There's a two-year blank, however, when she graduated from that school. Then she came down here."

"Do you know about her half sister in Houston?"

"No, we don't." Randall set his half-filled can of beer back on the table. "All we know is that she's made some trips down there. We've never been able to find out why."

"She refers to her as her good sister, Frances."

"Good sister?"

"Yes."

Randall changed the subject while he considered what I'd just told him. "With Lattimore out of the way and his stock in Mary Anne's hands, you're now a priority target, the only person standing between the unknown man in Chicago and complete control of Mifflin."

"The stockholders' reports have been vague about what they actually manufacture out there," I said.

"Employees think they're working on top secret defense contracts. Actually, they're manufacturing re-

mote control bomb fuses, eavesdropping equipment more sophisticated than the stuff available to our government, and other things we don't know about yet. Mifflin is the crime syndicate's Oak Ridge, you might say, or White Sands."

"It's all beginning to add."

"Do you want to play a dangerous game, and maybe crack this town and Mifflin wide open? In good hands, Mifflin Electronics could become a prime defense contract plant."

"Name the game."

"We'll go from here in the squad car back to the Aztec, ostensibly to collect your belongings before I take you in for booking. The parking lot is a dark one. You break away from me there and split for Houston to find Mary Anne's half sister. My hunch says she can help us, if only with a name."

"I'll play."

"The man who got Lattimore will be out to get you. Are you armed?" He reached across the table and slapped the holster under my left armpit. "I see you are, and I'm glad I talked John out of frisking you. How well can you use your weapon?"

"If I can see it, I can hit it."

"Good. Memorize this phone number." He gave it to me and made sure I had it. "Call me on that line from Houston, when you get down there," he said. "I may have a description of this man named Wilson for you by then. His voice pattern is

being run through our Washington computer system."

When we had collected my luggage and were out beside my car, in the parking lot, and had checked it out for any explosive devices, Randall said, "You've got to lay me out hard enough to convince my partner I made a bad mistake."

I obliged him with a sharp right hook that laid him at my feet.

"You all right?" I asked, looking down at him.

Randall moved his chin with his hand. "Yes, I guess you didn't break my jaw, after all. Don't forget that phone number."

AN ARTIST FRIEND once explained to me what he knows as "inspiration" is called a "hunch" by Mr. Average Citizen. I can't offer another reason for seeking Mary Anne's half sister at the good sisters of Mary convent first.

Mother Superior was a middle-aged woman with calm eyes and a stoic face.

"I must ask your purpose in wanting to speak with Sister Frances," she told me, in the quiet of her small office.

"She may be able to clear me from a charge of murder," I said.

There was no change of expression on Mother Superior's face.

"Go to the chapel that was to your left when you came into the convent," she said. "Kneel at the prayer rail."

I followed her instructions. A positive sense of danger had begun to close in on me, so I prayed while I waited.

A long ten minutes later there was the swish of black robes and the perfume of cleanliness as a young woman knelt beside me at the altar.

"I know that Mary Anne's husband has been slain," she said, in a soft and modest voice, "so what is it I can do to help you, if you are innocent?"

"I am innocent."

"Why have you come to me?"

"Has Mary Anne ever mentioned anyone she knew in Chicago during the two years after she graduated from secretarial school?"

"Yes. She's confessed to me about Paul Gambrini. She was his mistress. That's all I can tell you."

The name had a familiar ring but I couldn't place him.

Sister Frances crossed herself and rose to leave.

"Thank you," I said.

Her smile could have meant anything.

I crossed the hot street outside the cool convent walls to a corner telephone booth. Randall answered on the first ring.

"Mary Anne was Paul Gambrini's mistress in Chicago," I said.

"That helps a lot, but listen to me, and carefully. Wilson is a short, thin man, who looks more like a C.P.A. or a bank teller than a killer."

I was staring across the street at a car that had just parked outside the convent walls. It wasn't a gray Buick.

"He followed you to Glover in a stolen car," Randall went on, "and we have his prints from the rearview mirror, as well as a description from Washington. A black Chev two-door, 1967, has been stolen here in Glover."

That was the make of car parked under the convent walls.

The driver, casually crossing the street toward me, could have been a certified public accountant or a bank teller. He was neatly and conservatively dressed, a pleasant expression was on his face; a sort of inward smile.

His hand was in the side pocket of his sports jacket—his left hand.

"Is this Wilson left-handed?" I asked.

"He is."

"I think he's twenty yards away from me, right now. I'm in a phone

booth." I gave Randall the street names. "What do I do now?"

I knew, then, how Wilson planned to do it. He'd wait until he was at the sliding door, behind me. Maybe his weapon was silenced; perhaps it wasn't, but I doubted the report would be heard as anything more than a car's backfire.

"If you're sure, shoot first," Randall said.

I stepped back out of the booth; it was as if my right leg had been stolen—no pain, no noticeable shock it just wasn't under me any longer, and I was falling.

Prone, I had my weapon, twisted, propped up on my elbows, and began squeezing the trigger.

Wilson staggered back a step, did a light little step to the left; fell to his right, knees drawn up, arms across his face. I watched as his legs relaxed and the soles of his shoes fell outward; saw his arms spread out, with a spasm. His fists clenched, then the fingers relaxed.

My right leg was back with me again; still there was no pain. I heard a siren. Staring at the gushing blood that was staining my pants leg I hoped they were coming for me. Then fainted.

Randall visited me in the Houston hospital, after the lawyer I'd retained had just left. He and Randall had talked in the hall.

"That was a good thought, deeding over your Mifflin stock to the Good Sisters," he said. "Gambrini heads up one of the Chicago Cosa Nostra families, you know. Mary Anne is talking, and talking, and talking. Lattimore had a trick, remote-controlled slot machine in the executive lounge at the plant.

"Gambrini heard about it, and wanted it for the game room in his Gold Coast apartment. We have him for shipping gambling equipment across state lines until Mary Anne stops talking. By that time, we'll have enough on Gambrini to put him away for keeps."

"What happens to her?" I asked him.

Randall shrugged. "She's a valuable property of the U. S. Government right now. We take care of our own. Don't worry about Mary Anne."

Randall told me a group of Glover industrialists were going to reorganize Mifflin.

Back in New Orleans, I got a surprised, "Hello!" from Kay Jordan.

She was at the receptionist desk opening mail.

"You've changed," I said.

"Do you think so?" She touched a hand to her hair. "How have I changed, Mark?"

"You've changed your hair style. I can't remember what it was before, but now it's different."

Kay laughed. "So I didn't waste my money, after all," she said.

Strictly speaking, this is not a true detective story. But once in a blue moon a yarn comes our way that is so unusual, so completely different, that we break established rules and use it. "The Specimen Takers" is of that brand. Read it. You'll see.

THE SPECIMEN TAKERS

"We have conquered galaxies," the voice said. "We know about your feeble little Earth and are not afraid. But—do not offend us. Do not ever dare to frighten us. Because if that ever happens . . ."

by RAY HANSON

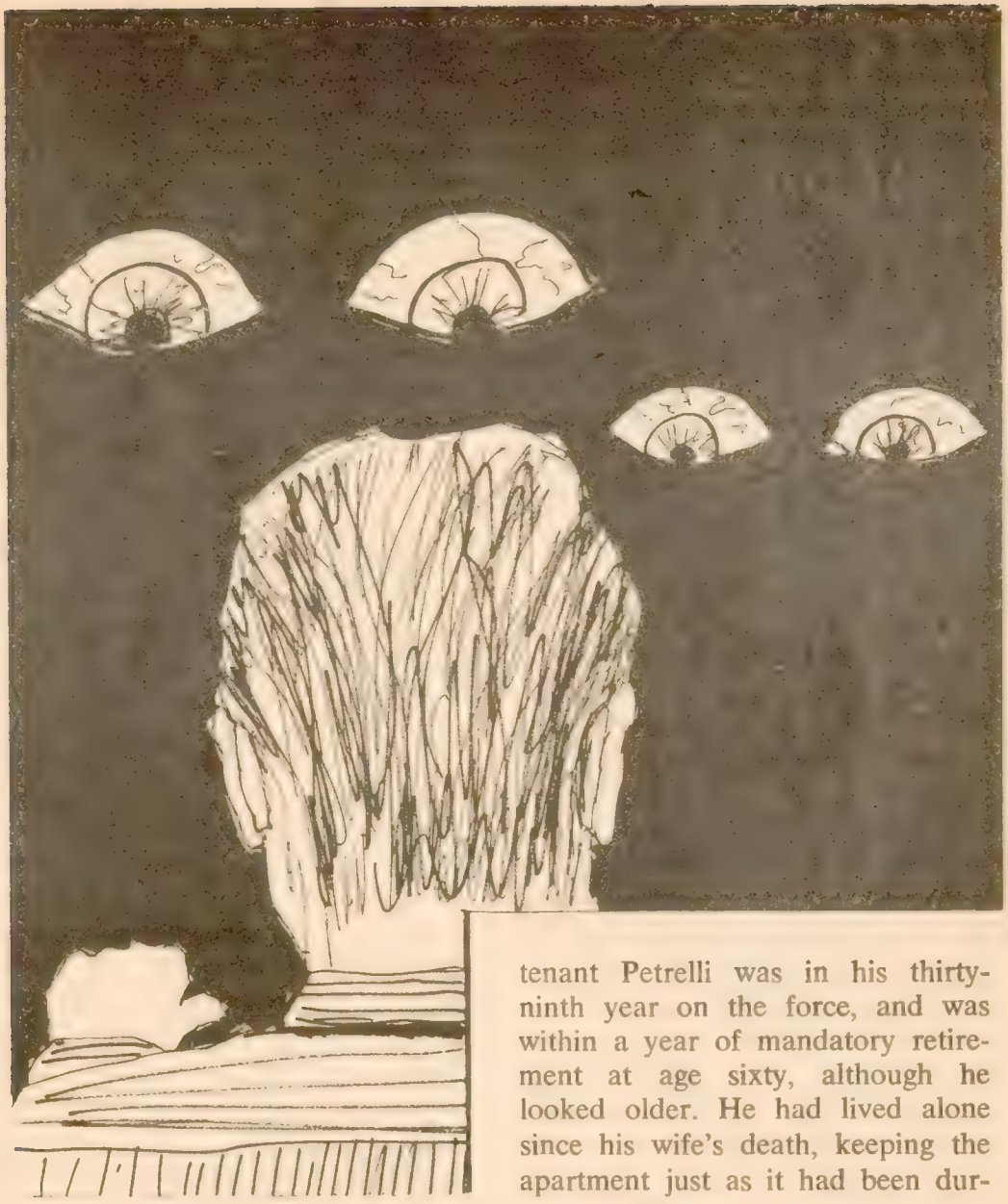
THE PATROL CAR picked up Detective Lieutenant Petrelli in front of his apartment house at ten after seven. It was a muggy spring morning in New York, the kind of hazy, backlit morning that promises steam-room heat later in the day.

Detective Captain Bradshaw had been very noncommittal on the telephone.

"Sorry to wake you like this, Petrelli," Bradshaw had said, "but this is important. I'm calling all hands in on this one. Tell you all about it when you get here. Can you be ready to go in about ten minutes?"

"I think so," Petrelli had said, the sleep still in his voice. "This isn't the first time I've been rousted out early. I remember one time in thirty-seven—."

"Yes, yes," Bradshaw had said with irritation. "I'm sure you do. Anyway, the car will be there in about ten minutes. Be ready."



And he had rung off.

It was not that Petrelli and Bradshaw did not get along, exactly; it was more a matter of being in different generations. Detective Lieutenant Petrelli was in his thirty-ninth year on the force, and was within a year of mandatory retirement at age sixty, although he looked older. He had lived alone since his wife's death, keeping the apartment just as it had been during her lifetime.

Captain Bradshaw, on the other hand, had a college degree in police science and had joined the force in 1949 after four years of study—and football—on the G.I. Bill. He

had been promoted over Petrelli some years before, and he suspected the grey, elderly detective of harboring strong resentments against him. In this he was right. But Petrelli was a gentle man, in essence, and so Bradshaw had little real reason to worry.

"What's it all about?" Petrelli asked the uniformed driver on the way to Central Homicide downtown.

"I don't know, Lieutenant," the driver said. "Nobody's saying anything at all. Captain Bradshaw's got everybody's mouth taped up on this one."

That would be like Bradshaw, Petrelli thought. Hold the lid on, keep the press at bay, come up with a suspect in a hurry, and tell everybody to sleep well tonight. Just like in the classroom.

But perhaps he was being unfair, he decided. Bradshaw did get results. If this was a bad one—and it sounded like one, all right—then Bradshaw's methods were probably quite correct.

In the old days—ah, that was when police work was exciting! Captain Hanrahan would have held three press conferences by now, and the whole city would be on the alert. But Captain Hanrahan had died long ago.

When they arrived at Central Homicide, Petrelli alighted from the car and immediately sensed the atmosphere of suppressed excitement that prevailed there. Several reporters were hanging around the lobby, but they were apparently being told nothing. Department employees bustled through the halls with a strong air of purpose.

Petrelli showed his badge to the officer on duty and was admitted to the bowels of the building. As he rode the elevator to the sixth floor, he reveled in the building's familiar smell of cigar smoke and pine disinfectant. There was a half-century of memories in that smell.

Captain Bradshaw's suite of offices looked like a detective's convention when Petrelli walked in. He recognized a couple of oldtimers obviously called in from Brooklyn and Staten Island, and exchanged greetings with day-shirt regulars. Nobody knew any more than he did. Petrelli settled for a tenuous perch on a desk corner next to the room's center aisle and waited for Captain Rufus Bradshaw to make his belated appearance and clear up the big mystery.

The wait wasn't long at all.

Bradshaw appeared like a whirlwind, followed by a half-dozen detective sergeants and uniformed officers. He churned down the aisle, the sweat gleaming on his pudgy child's face. In the center of the room, he chased two detectives off a desk and stood up on it. He was clearly in his element.

"Gentlemen," he began, panting a bit, "I'll try to fill you in as quickly as possible, since you must be wondering what this is all about.

All right, here it is. There's a maniac loose in this city. He killed a Hunter College coed last night and left her body in an alleyway in the West Seventies. I think there's reason to think he'll strike again, since the body was mutilated."

There was a buzz of excitement in the room. Homicidal maniacs were difficult to deal with, since they never did anything logically. Systematic police work was often ineffective against such individuals, whose capture all too often depended on some lucky break. Whenever a psychopath cut loose, the department always took a hell of a public-relations beating.

"Rather than stand up here and talk all morning about this, I've prepared a fact sheet that will give you all the details—and the details, gentlemen, are quite shocking. Read the fact sheet thoroughly, because frankly we haven't got a single lead on this thing. While you're getting filled in, I'm going to start calling you into my office one at a time, so I can give you specific assignments. We're all going to be plenty busy until this guy is caught."

Detective Captain Bradshaw hopped nimbly down from the desk. Despite his bulk he moved well, Petrelli had to admit. As Bradshaw steamed down the aisle and disappeared into his office at the end, the sergeants and officers who had followed him in began handing out dittoed information sheets. Petrelli

took one and settled down to familiarize himself with the case.

The girl's name, he read, was Rosemary Stanford. She was from South Wellfleet, Massachusetts, and had been in her junior year at Hunter when she was killed. Her roommate reported her missing when she failed to return from a study session in the college library the previous evening.

The victim had been a serious girl, an honors student in political science who wrote poetry and had no steady boy friend. The boys she did date all seemed highly respectable. Even Petrelli, who had become impatient with students in general after several outbreaks of disorder on New York campuses, had to admit that.

Anyway, Rosemary Stanford had been found propped against a wall in an alley. There was no evidence of a struggle, no blood, and no sign of sexual molestation. Her purse was in her lap and had not been opened.

There was one thing, however, that separated Rosemary Stanford's demise from the many other murders that occur yearly in the streets of New York.

Her brain was missing.

Detective Lieutenant Petrelli blinked his eyes and re-read that passage again. Sure enough, whoever had killed Rosemary had opened her cranial cavity with surgical precision and removed her brain. And he had expended a great deal of effort to reconstruct her physically so that the scar hardly showed.

Petrelli's interview with Bradshaw went just about the way he expected it to. The detective captain was clearly feeling the pressure already. He wanted Petrelli to start checking the lists of escaped mental-home inmates from all over the country, and to take particular interest in those who might once have worked in hospitals, funeral parlors, or morgues.

Bradshaw made it clear that they were trying to pick up what appeared to be a completely cold trail. Petrelli left the office resigned to spending days in the sorting of escaped loonies, hoping to find one who had somehow, somewhere, exhibited all the skill and technique of a neurosurgeon.

He spent the rest of the morning assessing the talents of a horde of escapees, hoping to find just one that approached the qualifications demonstrated by the murder. He read of rapists, ax-murderers, child molesters, congenital alcoholics, and even one old codger who specialized in poisoning dogs. They were all on the loose, but it was hard to imagine any of them murdering—and then pillaging—poor Rosemary Stanford.

By midday, Petrelli was ready to throw in the towel. He picked up a cold, greasy, vending-machine sandwich and a carton of milk, and went downstairs to eat lunch with his friend, Myron Gottlieb, who ran the crime laboratory in the basement. Gottlieb welcomed him with a tired wave, and motioned him to the stool next to his own at a long table glistening with an elaborate display of glass piping and retorts.

"What's all this?" Petrelli asked him. "Looks like something out of a Bela Lugosi movie."

"A new-type coffee maker it's not," Myron said. "Listen, I've been down here since one-o'clock this morning, and my eyeballs are about to jump out of my head."

"Working hard, huh?" Petrelli asked.

"Too hard for an old man like me." Like Petrelli, Gottlieb had spent many years working for the police department. He lived with his wife in the Bronx, and was due to retire in a couple of years.

"So what gives?" Petrelli asked.

"The girl, of course," replied Gottlieb. I've been running test after test. Blood, spinal fluid, you name it. I've even had her clothes

under black light and in front of the infra-red camera. Ach, let's eat and we'll talk about it after."

Then he caught sight of Petrelli's plastic-wrapped sandwich. "Is that all you got today?"

"I didn't have time to make a sandwich," Petrelli said. "Bradshaw called me early and sent a prowl car up for me. A lot of good it's done him."

"I never could stand those damned machine-sandwiches," Gottlieb said. "I'm glad Sarah got up and fixed me something. Listen, I got an extra hardboiled egg. Why don't you have it?"

"You sure you don't want it?" Petrelli asked.

"Take it, please. You got to have something to kill the taste of that mess."

The two men finished their lunch in silence, then wadded up the leftover paper debris and arched basketball shots into the waste basket across the room.

"So," said Petrelli. "Did you find anything out?"

"A couple of things, but they don't make a hell of a lot of sense," Gottlieb replied.

"You never know," Petrelli said.

"First of all," said Gottlieb, "the girl was drugged."

"I figured something like that," Petrelli said.

"But it wasn't anything ordinary, like heroin, or morphine, or even codeine," said Gottlieb. "The fact is, I can't tell you what it was."

"You mean, you can't pin it down?" Petrelli asked.

"That's right," Gottlieb replied. "From the relaxed nature of the muscle-tissue samples, it must have been pretty potent stuff. But none of the standard tests tell us anything."

"A mystery drug," Petrelli said, rubbing his chin in perplexity. "You find out anything else?"

"Nothing pathological," replied Gottlieb. "You know she still had her purse with her? Well, it had been dropped in something that left a powdery deposit on the suede leather."

"Did you test for that?"

"I did."

"What was it?" Petrelli asked.

"Oyster shell," said Gottlieb with a shrug.

"Oyster shell?"

"Oyster shell."

THAT NIGHT, another young woman was found in an alley, this time a Columbia coed who had been reported missing by her parents, with whom she had lived at home. The circumstances were almost exactly the same as in the murder of Rosemary Stanford, except that the alley was in another neighborhood and the time of discovery was slightly different. Surgery had again been applied.

By now, the story was creating scare headlines in all the newspapers. Even blase, impersonal New York was in something of a panic.

Police patrols in midtown Manhattan were doubled, hundreds of social misfits were rounded up and questioned, and the mayor announced that he was considering a curfew that would begin daily at sundown.

A religious group in Brooklyn announced that the murders were a sign of divine intervention, and seventeen deranged citizens made full confessions to both killings.

Meanwhile, Petrelli sorted doggedly through his lists, even though his mind was on oyster shells. A smudge of the finely powdered substance had been found on the shoe of the second murdered girl.

Bradshaw was sweating blood on the case and had sent men to comb the eastern half of Long Island, checking out commercial oyster companies. The most important finding of this phase of the investigation was that the oyster industry around New York City was in serious decline because of water pollution, high operating costs, and a variety of other reasons.

"So where would anybody come into contact with oyster shells?" asked a thoroughly baffled Gottlieb over coffee on the morning of the second murder.

"God only knows," answered Petrelli.

Yet there was the germ of an idea hiding deep within his mind. All along, he had had an idea that Bradshaw's Long Island investigation would produce nothing. Not that it was a bad move. It was certainly the logical thing to do. But there its greatest weakness lay. It was too logical.

The next day being Saturday, Petrelli volunteered to help out on the weekend shift, but Bradshaw did not feel that his presence would be necessary and dismissed the older man with the advice that he spend the weekend at home, getting plenty of rest for the week ahead. Petrelli did not argue. He had plans of his own.

Squandering four hours of accrued leave, Petrelli spent the afternoon in the New York Public Library. He noticed that the usual library crowd of students, hippies, and loafers had thinned considerably, and was almost exclusively male. He spent almost two hours going through the vast indexes of the metropolitan daily newspapers, then retired to the microfilm room to continue his research.

By five o'clock, he had checked the possibilities he considered reasonable. And he even had a name to go on, a name out of the past, out of the war years when New York had been a center of hastily organized military activity. A check of the retired officers roster, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, told him that Colonel John A. Peterson was still alive and well and living in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. As of the last register, anyway. Petrelli prayed that the colonel would be blessed with superior longevity.

Then he went home and booked a person-to-person call to him.

Later in the day it was dusk when Detective Lieutenant Petrelli alighted from a slow-moving local train at a small station on the Jersey side of the Hudson. The yellow wooden building was curiously oldfashioned, as was the tiny hamlet that surrounded it. A funky, cheesy smell pervaded the air. It was an odor Petrelli had smelled many times in his life, when the wind was from the west. The swamp that gave rise to it could not be very far away.

An old ticket clerk was sweeping out his tiny office in the rickety building. Petrelli walked up to the doorway and leaned on a rickety baggage cart until the man noticed him.

"Slotko Field?" the ticket clerk asked, when Petrelli had told him what he was looking for. "Well, you go up the road, past the grocery store, past the bar, and out along the old shore road. It's about a mile or so."

"Is there a taxi in town?" asked Petrelli.

"Any other night of the week, you'd be in luck. But not right now. The fellow that runs it got drunk last night and drove his auto into a gate post. Broke his arm."

"Well," said Petrelli, "I guess I'll have to walk it."

"You can if you want to," said the ticket clerk. "There's nothing out there, though, but a few broken-down old hangars and some runways with weeds grown over 'em. It's none of my business, mister, why you want to go out there. But take my advice and stay on the road, 'cause it gets plenty swampy along that stretch. Good thing it's not full summer yet, or the mosquitoes would eat you alive."

Petrelli left him shaking his head at the foolishness of city people, and set out walking. The road leading north out of the hamlet was rutted tarmac, no more than a single lane wide. The stench of the swamp, which glistened eerily on both sides of the road, intensified as Petrelli strode along. He began to perspire, and removed his light topcoat for comfort. He was glad there were no mosquitoes. Despite the smell, despite the gathering darkness, he felt good. He had not had a walk in the country for years.

After about twenty minutes, he came to a turnoff leading up to a small compound of dilapidated, rusted-steel hangars and tarpaper-covered wooden outbuildings.

The landing field had been established in a hurry during the early days of World War II, and had been designed after the small airdromes that had ringed London during the blitz.

After its frenzied construction, the field had never been used extensively. The Army Air Force planners realized too late that the British example was only valid when the enemy could base their aircraft within easy striking distance. Slotko

Field had sat out the war as an emergency facility manned by rejects too old or too physically impaired for service with other units.

Petrelli found himself confronting a wire-mesh gate set in the barbed-wire fence surrounding the compound. A sign warned him that the area was government property, and that tresspassers would be prosecuted. But he found, on closer inspection, that the gate was not locked. And as he swung the gate back and entered the confines of Slotko Field, he noted that somebody had recently oiled the hinges.

A continuation of the tarmac turnoff ran toward the hangars and other buildings of the facility. Petrelli would investigate them in due time. First, however, he walked to the edge of the pavement, took a small flashlight from his topcoat pocket, and plashed it over the nearby ground.

He left the pavement and trudged a few paces over the whitish material. It crunched under his feet, and had a peculiar, gritty resiliency. Slotko Field must have rested on the largest unbroken expanse of oyster-shell swamp fill in northern New Jersey.

He remembered the long-distance conversation with Colonel Peterson earlier that evening.

"Yes," the colonel had said after Petrelli had identified himself and asked a few preliminary questions, "as Army District Engineer for the Manhattan District during the early war years, I was responsible for virtually all of the military construction in that area."

The colonel's slow Louisiana voice became almost wistful as he remembered long-forgotten details of an earlier, more active life. "But there's only one instance I can remember when we used oyster shell extensively. It was over in New Jersey. A place called Slotko Field. We had to dredge a rescue-boat basin in that area and build a small airfield nearby. Since the dredging removed a bunch of old oyster beds, we decided to kill two birds with one stone and use the shell to fill the swamp.

"Of course, it wasn't a real swamp, as we have them down here in the bayou country, but it was pretty mucky and maybe a foot or two deep. The oyster shell worked real fine. You say this is in connection with that murderer loose up there?"

"Yes, sir," Petrelli told him.

"Well, I'll be damned," said the colonel. "The wife and I have been hearing all about that on Huntley-Brinkley. Sure hope you catch him."

"So do I," Petrelli had said.

The detective lieutenant returned to the tarmac road and walked toward the hangars and other buildings that constituted what was left of Slotko Field. Darkness had fallen by now, and his flashlight danced over the pavement as he approached the nearest of the derelict structures.

They were pretty far gone. Doors

hung half off their hinges, and jagged holes gaped out at the world where windows used to be. The tarpaper coverings of the smaller buildings had cracked and deteriorated, so that they had a shaggy, torn quality, like discarded packing crates. They were quite deserted.

The two hangar buildings were not much better. They were of steel construction, shaped like giant quonset huts. Rust covered them like a sprayed coat of thick, dark primer laid over an unsanded surface. One hangar lacked a door, and yawned vacantly toward the pattern of runways beyond its entrance. Petrelli probed his light around inside it. It was deserted, except for a number of furry-edged graffiti left there by vandals armed with dripping paintbrushes.

The other hangar was closed and locked. Petrelli walked around its outside, inspecting it closely with his flashlight. It seemed to be the better-preserved of the two, a uniform, rusty skeleton of smug, solidly enclosed security. It seemed to Petrelli, in fact, that the structure was too secure, considering its age and the condition of its mate. He poked around the massive sliding door that enclosed the hangar's front.

The door seemed as old as the rest of the structure, and close flashlight scrutiny revealed nothing that would indicate recent activity. The padlock securing it was another story, however. It was massive and expensive looking. And it was brand, shiningly new.

His face set and serious, Petrelli then explored the runways of Slotko Field. They were of cement-slab construction, and were well preserved, even after almost thirty years. The dancing beam of the flashlight revealed nothing out of the ordinary. The slabs were grey and planar, and where the tar grouting had deteriorated away between them, weeds had sprung up to heights of a foot or more.

Petrelli switched off the light and stood, musing. In the east, toward New York, a tardy moon was rising orangely through the river mist. It was while he was standing thus, in the darkness, that Petrelli noticed the dull glow about ten feet away.

Baffled, he walked over and stood regarding it gravely. It was simply a circular area about fifty feet in diameter, and it gave off light, although the glow was barely discernible. Petrelli explored the circular area with his flashlight. He saw that the weeds, which grew elsewhere on the runways in a regular pattern of square grids, had, in this faintly luminescent circle, shriveled and died.

WHEN PETRELLI detrained back in the city, it was well into the wee hours. He went immediately to a train-level news stand, bought late editions of the papers, and was relieved when he learned that no new murder had been reported that night. He decided that he would talk with Bradshaw in the morning, and took the subway home. He brewed a cup of hot chocolate, made brief notes about his discoveries, and fell into bed exhausted.

But his much-needed sleep was not to be. He awoke before dawn, feeling numb and uneasy. He attempted to slide out from under the covers, but found he could not. Then he realized that he was not alone in the room. He distinctly heard the creak of a chair, then a voice.

"We are sorry to inconvenience you," the voice said. "But we have made it temporarily impossible for you to move. The effects of the—ah, medication—will wear off in a few hours."

"Who are you?" Petrelli rasped, his throat almost closed with fright.

"I regret that we cannot introduce ourselves," the voice said. "It would serve no purpose."

"You've been very busy tonight," said a second voice. "We have a few questions to ask you, and several observations to make. We shall try not to take up much of your time."

Both voices were masculine and spoke English with no trace of regional accent. But they were peculiarly metallic in tone and, although polite and even apologetic, entirely lacked personality.

"How did you find our base?" asked the first voice.

Petrelli remained silent, his mind racing.

"Please," said the second voice. "We don't intend to harm you. But we must know: how did you find our base?"

"Oyster shell," Petrilli said finally.

"I'm sorry," the first voice said. "I don't follow you."

"We found oyster shell—finely powdered oyster shell—on the two dead girls," Petrelli said. "I mean, on the shoe of one of them and the purse of the other."

"Ah," said the first voice. "But oyster shell is a common enough substance, is it not?"

"Not in this area," Petrelli said. "We immediately began checking the commercial oyster houses in the area. But I had a hunch—"

"A what?" interrupted the second voice.

"A hunch," Petrelli said. "A presentiment. Oyster shell is sometimes used as a temporary construction material, and I had a hunch I might find an abandoned site where the stuff had been used."

"But how did you do it so fast?" asked the first voice.

"Luck," Petrelli said. "I remembered that it is used extensively in the southern part of the country."

"But still," said the second voice, "you didn't really have very much to go on."

"No," said Petrelli. "But when I found out that Slotko Field had once been swamp in the vicinity of a large, abandoned oyster reef, I decided it was worth checking out."

"And so you took a blind chance on Slotko Field being the place you were looking for?" asked the first voice.

"It wasn't an entirely blind chance," Petrelli said. "I got in touch with the engineer who had supervised the project—a southerner from Louisiana—and he confirmed my hunch."

"I must say," said the second voice, "that you exhibited a great deal of initiative. You gave us quite an exciting moment when you turned up with your flashlight."

"Is that why you didn't murder another girl tonight?" Petrelli asked.

"Please," said the first voice. "There are certain things you should understand before you begin describing our activities in such perjorative terms."

"But it was you who did it, right?" asked Petrelli.

"Yes," said the first voice. "We did it. But we have only the best interests of you and your people in mind. You must understand that."

"I'm sorry," Petrelli said wearily. "But I just don't understand at all."

"Then we shall explain," said the second voice. "You see, we are about to declare your planet a trusteeship."

"My what?" Petrelli asked, his weariness forgotten.

"Your planet," the second voice continued. "The planet your people refer to as Earth."

"Oh, God," moaned Petrelli aloud. "I must be having a nightmare."

"An understandable human reaction," the first voice said. "But you must control yourself and listen. I assure you that you are being confronted with nothing but reality."

"We represent a federation of galaxies many, many light years removed from this planet," the second voice said. "After millions of years of evolutionary development—and, I might add, no little strife—we have succeeded in estbalishing a political system in which victimization and destruction are unknown. We regulate ourselves thoroughly to prevent wars and other depredations. We have conquered pestilence and established a technology far in advance of your own. We live in

peace, and friendship, and gentleness."

"Then why are you down here killing girls?" Petrelli asked.

"We're sorry, but our activities in the past few days have been absolutely necessary," said the first voice. "As we said before, we intend to establish a trusteeship over your planet, for its own preservation as well as for ours. To do this, we must study the human race in detail. We achieve this mostly by reading your books, periodicals, and technical journals. We've found that we can learn virtually everything we need to know about your people by combing through your libraries. Even your physiology has become familiar to us by this method.

"But there is one area which has thus far remained a mystery to us. I refer, of course, to the human brain. Even your finest physicians, surgeons, and psychologists know practically nothing about this organ, and yet it would seem to be the center of all human response, both conscious and unconscious. Unfortunately, to learn about the brain, we need specimens."

"But why girls?" Petrelli asked. "Why, these young, defenceless creatures? Why not men's brains?"

"Oh," said the second voice. "We already have plenty of your men's brains. To get them, it is only necessary to visit one of your battlefields at night. Nobdoy worries about a few men apparently missing in action. The area you call Southeast Asia has been extremely productive over the last few ears. No, we took these female samples purely for the sake of balancing our investigations. Believe me, we were as gentle as we possibly could be. We did not enjoy our task."

"Why can't you just go away and leave us alone?" Petrelli wailed in misery.

"Because you're rocking the boat," said the first voice. "It started in 1944, when you began setting off nuclear explosions. Then, when you developed even more powerful explosives and began sending rockets into space, we really began to get worried. But it was only recently, when some of your more flexible minded scientists began to speculate about the speed of light being a surmountable limitation, that we decided to act.

"You see, once you figure out how to exceed the speed of light—and you will before long, despite what the bulk of your scientists think—then you start endangering us directly. And we do not intend to permit you to do so. In a very short time, we will quarantine this planet and keep it out of mischief. But please do not worry. We intend to use reason and persuasion if you give us the chance."

"But why are you telling me all this?" Petrelli asked.

"Because we are impressed by the speed with which you located our base," said the second voice. "We couldn't imagine how you did

it, and we were frankly amazed. Besides, what harm does it do us?"

"What do you mean?" asked Petrelli.

"Just this," the second voice continued. "If you were to tell anybody of our visit to you tonight, what would be their reaction?"

"Yes," said the first voice. "What do you suppose they would do?"

"I suppose they would laugh," Petrelli said.

"Exactly," said the second voice. "They would laugh. Another very understandable human reaction."

"Tell me," asked Petrelli, "what do you intend to do now?"

"Don't worry," the first voice said. "We don't intend to take any more female specimens. Causes too much stir. I'm happy to say we're on our way back home, before we run into any more policemen with hunches. Now sleep, Mr. Petrelli. We have much more regard for you than you realize."

And Petrelli dropped off instantly.

At ten o'clock the next morning, Petrelli walked into Detective Captain Bradshaw's office at Central Homicide, looking very chipper for a man of fifty-nine and determined to tell his whole story, regardless of the outcome. It was something he simply had to do. He felt a bit sheepish, but he was determined.

To his surprise, he was greeted by a smiling and jocular Bradshaw.

"Well, Petrelli," Bradshaw said, "a good, good morning to you. What brings you down here on your day off?"

"Captain Bradshaw," said Petrelli, "there are some things I have to tell you. About the coed murders. You're not going to believe this—"

"So you've come up with some new ideas, huh?" Bradshaw finished for him. "Well, you're wasting your time, old friend. It's all over. Wrapped up as neat as a package of fish."

"What?" Petrelli asked, shocked.

"Yep. We got him," Bradshaw said. "He walked into a hockshop down on Third Avenue last night and tried to pawn a bracelet. The owner looked inside it and found Rosemary Stanford's named engraved there. The family has identified it, and the suspect is behind bars. Phew!"

"But I don't understand—"

"Open and shut for a change," said Bradshaw. "We picked the guy up, got a search warrant, and turned his apartment inside out. Found about a hundred empty wine bottles, a big stack of nudie magazines, and a complete set of surgeon's instruments. Not only that, but the guy's a two-time loser. Armed robbery and manslaughter convictions already. Says he picked up the bracelet near the alley where the girl was found. He hasn't got a chance!"

"What if I told you there's been a dreadful mistake?" Petrelli asked, his face horror-stricken. "What if I told you that the man is innocent, that this case has extraterrestrial

implications, that the murders of the coeds were part of a program by a federation of distant galaxies to declare this planet a trusteeship?"

Bradshaw laughed, slapping his knee. "I'd say you had a hell of a sense of humor, and I'd ask you where you've been hiding it all these years!" He laughed again.

"A very understandable human reaction, I suppose," said Lieutenant Petrelli.

But the captain was laughing so hard he didn't hear him

Petrelli's request for retirement went in the following day. Within a week, he had become a man of leisure. Within another week, he had entered a small monastery in upstate New York as a lay brother. He writes frequently to Gottlieb, who is amazed at the qualities of inner peace now evident in his old friend.

Myron Gottleib attributes them to the leisurely pace of life in the old abbey.

Petrelli is still there, tending a small garden, reading a lot, praying a lot, and waiting.

ATTENTION—ALL WESTERN FANS

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Joy is nice to share, she knew. But the guilt of murder—that you must bear alone . . .

LONELY BURDEN

by

AUBREY S. NEWMAN

EVERYTHING WAS ready for the party, so Violet Hardin relaxed in the breakfast nook with a glass of sherry. Her long graceful neck supported an oval face framed by black hair streaked with gray. Her eyes cool and green like the bay waters, gave no hint she knew there might be trouble tonight.

Violet was sorry she had found out about it, and wished she could unsay what she'd said this morning. But that couldn't be changed now. It was nearing time to dress for the party. She smiled down at a copy of the gay invitations she had sent out.

Violet and Jensen Hardin
cordially invite you
to their
wine bibbing and cheese tasting
CONTEST
prizes to winners
and
to see the New Year in!
. . . from 9:30 pm to . . .?

Everybody had accepted, the five other couples of their unique retired community on the tiny peninsula jutting into Chesapeake Bay. They prided themselves on being quaint and unusual. Like the *Out To Pasture* sign over the entrance to Horseshoe Road, which U-turned around the peninsula to their six homes.

Such a nice group. Everybody liked everybody, and there were no clouds over The Pasture. At least no visible clouds. But Violet now knew the snake and the apple had entered their older citizen's Eden. She hoped, however, nothing would break into the open to mar her party, with guests due in an hour.

Three card tables were set up in the living room as though for a bridge evening, except they had white cloth covers. At each place there was a small blue wedgewood plate and linen napkin. Also a gold rimmed crystal wine glass.

In the kitchen bottles of wine were ready, six types: Spanish sherry, Italian chianti, American sauterne, German Rhine wine, English port, and French burgundy. Champagne for the midnight toast was extra.

Sliced cheeses were in the refrigerator. Three plates each of Canadian cheddar, Danish camembert, American pimento, Icelandic blue, Dutch edam, and Italian romano.

Later, as she sat at her French vanity dresser her husband appeared in the door, standing six feet straight, his gray hair giving him a distinguished look without dimming his vitality.

"You're gilding the lily, Violet," he said, smiling.

She made deft lipstick strokes, thinking, "Shall I tell Jensen what I know, so he'll be prepared for trouble if it happens?" Then decided, "No, I won't tell him."

Guests arrived in the usual straggle. First Vera and Arthur Franklin, followed by Alice and Jack Stone, Helen and Allen Schewe, Lita and Herman Watts, Irene and Richey Gordon.

After they were seated Jensen Hardin explained how it would work, giving each a scorecard on which to make entries. Then poured everybody a glass of Spanish sherry, while Violet placed Canadian cheddar slices on each table. The wines were to be judged by type, nationality, and estimated cost. The cheeses by type and nationality. Fifteen minutes were allowed to sample the wine, clear palates by savoring the cheese, and mark their cards.

After each two rounds of wine and cheese, the seating would be shuffled. Thus everybody would sit for a while with everybody else.

Things started fine. Lots of chatter, snooping in the kitchen for a look at the labels, peeking at each others' score cards. Quite a nice fun party, and Violet's inner tension eased. But not for long.

As she passed Icelandic blue cheese for the second round, Vera Franklin said, "What a clever party idea — and there never was a nicer group of friends anywhere!"

Violet caught a quick movement in the corner of her eye as Richey Gordon leaned forward, slapped the table in front of him and said, his voice thin and bitter, "Some of these so-called friends are not so nice, Vera, when you learn the truth!"

The pleasant party talk congealed into silence. Gordon's face was set in harsh lines, accented by black brows under bluish-white pompadoured hair. But it was from his staring smile that Violet sensed a veiled threat.

Suddenly, as though on signal, the party babble began again. Except now it was like a screen, hiding ugly thoughts. Who was he talking about, and for what hateful reason?

But it did not stop there. After Hardin poured the French burgundy, Gordon's trembling hand splashed a spreading red stain on the linen table covering. Once more there was a pulsing silence. Then everyone heard the words clearly.

"I'm sorry, Violet," he said, his voice breaking, "but all I've spilled is wine. It looks like blood. Maybe it's an omen!"

A queasy feeling of fear and uncertainty seeped through the room. While sprinkling salt on the stained cloth Violet saw Irene Gordon's tense face and wondered as she rubbed salt into the cloth with a finger tip, if Irene knew what had infuriated Richey.

By the fifth round of wine and cheese things were getting livelier, yet an electric tingle of fear lingered. It was not until Jensen started to pour the sixth round that he found an empty chair, with glass untouched — and Richey Gordon missing.

"May be in the john," Arthur Franklin said. "I'll look."

When he returned even his bald head was white, his chubby bounce gone. But there was an assured purposefulness about the little man Violet had never seen before. When

he stopped and looked around the room he seemed already to have assumed command, even before he spoke.

"Jensen," he said, his voice edged with authority, "this is your house, but a crime has been committed. As the only lawyer present, I am the logical one to assume temporary responsibility to preserve evidence until the sheriff gets here — if there is no objection."

Arthur Franklin paused, but there was no reply, so he continued: "Please stay seated, except as I ask your help."

He turned to Irene Gordon and said, "I'm terribly sorry, Irene, but Richey is dead. If you want to leave the room, Violet can go with you."

Violet knew Irene played at being hard-boiled, and that's what she did now. No tears, no hysteria. Just sat stiff and silent. She was the youngest on Horseshoe Road, only forty-two. Besides, she used to be a hospital operating room nurse, and was no stranger to death.

As though in an unreal dream Violet heard Arthur Franklin say, "You are the home owner, Jensen. Please phone the sheriff. Tell him I'm holding witnesses on the scene."

To the group he added, "One of you killed Richey Gordon. Until the murderer is found we are all suspects."

To Allen Schewe, who was taking things pretty cool, Franklin said, "Come with me, Allen, for a look around."

Vera Franklin and Lita Watts went over to visit with Irene. The conversation was subdued, like a wake, which in a macabre way it was. So Violet put wine bottles out, which helped a little.

When Arthur Franklin returned, followed by Allen Schewe and Jensen Hardin, he carried a plate of pimento cheese slices and a stack of white envelopes.

"Now," he said, as all eyes focused on him, "I'll not ask you to say anything that can be used against you. But I do request each of you to take a halfmoon bite from a slice of this cheese. Your slice will then be sealed in an envelope marked with your name. It's like taking finger prints. I'll go first."

Nobody refused. Franklin stood in the middle of the living room floor, face still pale and bald head glistening with a thin film of sweat. But his voice retained its controlled tone.

"Let me summarize," he said. "As you know, Violet and Jensen have connecting but separate bedrooms. Each has its own bath and separate door into the living room. Thus anyone can enter Violet's bedroom, unobserved from the living room, cross into Jensen's bedroom."

Franklin let them think that over briefly. Then his voice and manner turned legal and expounding as though he were making a courtroom summary to a jury.

"Richey Gordon is dead on Jen-

sen's bathroom floor, with the point of a steak knife in his heart. He was stabbed upward from the front, and it would take little force to drive the sharp pointed blade home in that soft part of his body.

"The knife came up from the kitchen, where it was used to slice cheese. When Richey was stabbed the knife pierced a linen napkin, pinning it against his body. The napkin also came from the counter where the cheeses were sliced."

Arthur Franklin paused again, then shifted from stating facts to deductions. "As we changed tables after the fourth round of wine and cheese the murderer apparently wandered into the kitchen, cut a slice of cheese and took a halfmoon bite from it. Then, through the open kitchen door, he saw Richey go into Jensen's bedroom.

"The knife was in his hand, the napkin available to smudge finger prints and cover the knife. Perhaps the wine inflamed whatever his powerful motive was. Anyway he saw the opportunity, and on sudden and overwhelming impulse, seized it.

"A man receiving such a knife thrust would sink to the floor quietly, any scuffing sound muffled by the closed door. Then the murderer returned to the living room, mixed with the others."

Violet sat staring at Arthur Franklin. Richey Gordon murdered? Who could have imagined that?

"What the murderer does not know until now," Franklin continued, "is that a slice of cheese with a halfmoon bite out of it was laying near Richey's body.

"People do strange things in the grip of emotional stress. The murderer, driven by an overpowering compulsion, held the cheese fragment in his left hand until striking the fatal blow with his right."

The chubby little man stood there, his jaw muscles bunching and unbunching. "You are my friends, and that certainly includes the one who killed Richey," Franklin said. "This is the hardest thing I've ever had to do, yet I have no choice, because this is murder.

"There is only one lady present who could logically enter the bathroom where Richey lay. Also there is an easily identifiable irregularity in the tooth alignment visible on the slice of cheese in the bathroom."

Violet suddenly understood the direction of his logic, as a car drove up outside and stopped .

"That is the sheriff and his crew arriving," Franklin continued. "Irene, I have positive proof of your guilt. Nobody else could have murdered Richey but you. In my opinion, as your friend and neighbor, if you killed Richey on impulse — for this was no planned murder — I believe it to your advantage, Irene, to admit it now."

When footsteps tapped on the front walk, Irene Gordon said in a dry penetrating whisper: "We had a terrible row this afternoon before coming over here. Richey told me

he was going to cancel his insurance tomorrow. Also write a new will, and divorce me. I believed him. It happened as you said, Arthur. Like something inside pushed me. I didn't want to kill Richey. But I did!"

The sheriff and his assistants took over the well organized routine. Statements, finger prints, photographs — and, eventually, removed the body.

Irene Gordon submitted to arrest in a frozen trance and was lead away. In spite of everything, Violet felt a surge of pity for the once vibrant woman who had seen the sun rise on a life enriched by friends and made confident by security. Now she would see the sun rise through bars, alone and friendless — a murderess.

The yellow light of pre-dawn was spreading a metallic shimmer on the bay waters by the time all outsiders were gone. Violet sat quietly in the breakfast nook, knowing Jensen was mopping blood from his bathroom floor so she would not have to see it.

Everything was over. Or was it?

Should she tell Jensen how she had discovered his affair with Irene Gordon, but shifted the burden by telling Richey Gordon yesterday morning and asked him to stop it?

So while Jensen had provided the motive, Violet knew herself to be guilty too, for she, miserably, had carried the tale. She turned her green eyes out the window to where the yellowish light of pre-dawn was changing to the crimson of sunrise and knew the answer.

Happiness is nicer shared — but guilt is a lonely burden.

NEXT MONTH:

THE MURDEROUS GENNA FIVE:
THEY BATHED CHICAGO IN BLOOD

by DAVID MAZROFF

Spawned in the slums of Chicago, schooled in the blood baths of Capone, the five infamous Genna brothers robbed and exploited and killed — and held the First Ward in the coils of deadly fear. Yet because Murder is the beginning and not the end, they died, one by one, as they had lived—by the gun. This is their terrible story. Watch for it at your newsdealers!

What did it mean, that strangled choked-off scream in the silence? One man alone knew—the killer.

RETRIBUTION

by

WILLIAM JEFFREY

IT HAD BEEN a quietly uneventful morning before Maurice Hamblin burst into the offices of Hamblin and Mulholland, Inc. The four girls in the stenographic pool were thinking up ways of passing the time before the coffee break and the office boy was badgering the new receptionist, who in turn was buffing her nails with studied disregard.

The frosted glass door swung open, letting some of the November chill sweep in, and then Hamblin slammed it behind him. He was short and rotund, with middle-age jowls and smooth skin florid from the cold.

He was dressed impeccably, as always, in a grey herringbone suit and vest, thin tie of muted stripes, wingtip shoes, and in deference to the weather, a black cheviot overcoat. He was the model of respectability and decorum, in spite of the obvious agitation he exhibited.

The receptionist looked up, startled. "Mr. Hamblin! What—"

"Mulholland! Is he in?"

"Mr. Hamblin, I really don't think—"

"Never mind! I'll see for myself!" He strode past the still shocked receptionist, down the aisle of typists to the pair of private offices at the far end. Activity came to an abrupt halt and six pairs of eyes followed him.

The office boy whispered to the receptionist, "I sure didn't expect to see him again."

"Do you think I should call the police?" she asked nervously.

"I don't know . . ."

Hamblin glanced at the aluminum nameplate on the left hand door, noting the name of Stuart J. Mulholland with a grimace. He went in without knocking.

The office was a twin of his own, but Mulholland preferred more decoration and had furnished his office in a Spanish decor. There were shelves with wrought-iron scrolls, and in one corner was an Aztec-inspired chest and mirror with a hand-carved sun motif and an antique red finish. On one wall was a large reproduction of Rembrant's "Man With Golden Helmet," and on the opposing wall was a replica of a conquistador's breastplate with two crossed swords behind it. The chairs and settee were of dark, satiny wood with basket-woven leather seats, and the desk matched with a massive beauty.

Hamblin had always considered the appointments as being too flamboyant for the conservative image of a stock broker; the breast-plate, he had opined, was downright ostentatious.

Mulholland was talking on the phone when Hamblin entered. He put the receiver down heavily without bothering to say good-by and blinked with surprise. "Maurice!"

"Hello, Stuart," Hamblin said icily. "Surprised to see me, aren't you?"

"I thought you'd been arrested!"

"Oh, I was, thanks to you. But I'm out on bail until the trial next month."

Mulholland sat back in his chair, silent for a moment. He was a tall, thin man, almost gaunt, his lined face cold but exuding grace and confidence. He made a tent of his fingers, and then said calmly, "If you came here for amnesty, Maurice, I'm afraid I can't help you. The bonding company is the one you'll have to convince of that."

Hamblin leaned on the desk and stared at his junior partner. "Don't hand me that. You're the one who embezzled the funds and I know it!"

Mulholland laughed softly. 'The audit proved otherwise. If I were you, Maurice, I'd make restitution of the company money. That is, if any of the hundred thousand is is left."

Hamblin pounded his fist on the desk. "Damn you, Stuart! I never took one unauthorized cent! The only other person who could have, who had access to the books to juggle them was you! I don't know

how long you've been bleeding the firm, or how you managed to frame me so well, but by God, you're not going to get away with it!"

Mulholland smiled again, somewhat thinly this time. "Your trouble, Maurice, is that you're a pompous old stuffed shirt, as they used to say in your day. Every idea I ever had to move this company out of the nineteenth century has been rejected by you. Well, you're out now, and I'm in control."

"By fraud! By trickery!"

"Call it anything you like," Mulholland said. "But there's nothing, absolutely nothing you can do about it."

Hamblin was trembling violently now. "You've ruined me. You've taken away my standing, my honor. My wife has left me. My friends have deserted me. I have become a common criminal." He backed away from the desk, clenching and unclenching his fists. "You've destroyed me!"

"Don't be so melodramatic," Mulholland said.

Hamblin stared at him for a long moment. The hatred in his grey eyes was recognizeable and consuming. Mulholland met the burning gaze impassively, as if he was being tolerant of a child.

Abruptly, Hamblin turned and walked to the side wall of the office. He stood there looking up at the crossed swords behind the breastplate, his lips pursed in a tight white, reflective line. Then, almost impulsively, he reached up and took one of the rapier-like weapons from its mounting brackets and held it by the long, thin, sharp blade with his right hand. Light from the overhead fixture reflected from the point.

Hamblin turned and strode purposefully back to Mulholland's desk. The younger man looked at Hamblin's face and saw almost calmness in it, and then he looked at the sword held in his partner's fingers. A frown creased his forehead and he moistened his lips.

"Maurice, what the hell are you doing?" he said with a touch of nervousness. "That's a real sword, you know."

"I know," Hamblin said evenly.

Mulholland didn't care for the transformation which seemed to have taken place in Hamblin. The discomfiture he felt was rapidly giving way to a gnawing fear, as though he suspected the old man had somehow become unhinged.

"Justice is blind," Hamblin said, "but not always. The wicked and the evil are punished for their actions sooner or later. An eye for an eye."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Hamblin smiled, a cold dispassionate smile. "What do you think it means, Stuart?"

The fear settled into an icy ball in the pit of Mulholland's stomach. His hand flashed out to the intercom unit beside him on the desk, to summon help from the outer office, but before his fingers could contact

the buttons, Hamblin slid his hand back along the sword blade and lashed forward with the springy weapon. The ornate hilt slapped resoundingly off the back of Mulholland's hand, sending shooting pain up his arm.

He cried out with shock and his left hand came up reflexively and grasped the handle. He jerked the weapon out of Hamblin's hand, kicking his swivel chair back and gaining his feet as he did so.

The two men stood immobile for an instant, and then Mulholland smiled again with a mixture of relief and regained confidence. He was in command once more. He stepped around the side of the desk, holding the sword loosely in his hand, the needle-sharp tip pointing at Hamblin's chest.

"You'd better leave now, Maurice," he said slowly. "And don't come back, or—"

Hamblin smiled ironically.

"I'm a dead man, Stuart. Did you know that?" he said softly. "Everything important and vital to me is gone, dead, and you did it. You killed me, as surely as if you'd run me through with that sword."

"That's nonsense, Maurice," Mulholland said coldly.

"No, it's the truth. I can no longer hold my head up; I have no reputation; no more image; no more pride. And without those things I'm nothing. I'd rather face death itself, peaceful, everlasting death, than the living hell of a trial and publicity, all that the future holds for me."

"Then why don't you commit suicide?" Mulholland said harashly, derisively. "Go home and take a bottle of sleeping pills."

"I've considered that," Hamblin told him. "But that would be too simple. You'd go unpunished, Stuart, and that wouldn't be just. There's no way I can undo what you've done to me—you covered yourself too well for that—but I can see that you're punished. I can see that you encounter the same living hell which I face."

"What are you—?"

Suddenly, Hamblin began to scream. He opened his mouth wide; an undulating sound of sheer mortal terror burst from his throat.

"No!" he cried piercingly. "No, don't do it, Stuart! God, please don't do it! Don't kill me. Don't . . ."

With those final words, Maurice Hamblin reached out with blinding speed to grasp the extended blade of the sword just below where Mulholland held its hilt. And Hamblin lunged forward, driving the sharp point into his chest. He died in a gasping, pain-edged scream.

When the door burst open an instant later, and the entire office force of Hamblin and Mulholland, Inc. looked in on a tableau which could only be interpreted one way, Stuart Mulholland knew that his former partner had made his retribution,—that this was the beginning of his own private hell . . .

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